Irwin: *The Jail*

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In this classic interview study of 100 San Francisco arrestees, first published in 1985, sociologist and former convict John Irwin argues that US jails are not filled with *serious lawbreakers* but with *disreputable persons* whose only crime is that of being offensive to public sensibilities. Jails constitute a vast and sprawling enterprise: in the United States alone, there exist some 3,000 jails and uncounted numbers of police lockups, including an expansive network of "temporary" holding facilities that at any given time enclose more than 730,000 pretrial detainees and convicts serving relatively short sentences of one year or lower, absorbing around 11.8 million persons over the course of a year (Minton and Golinelli 2014). Most of those held in jail have committed *petty crimes*, such as engaging in loitering or displaying public inebriation, Irwin contends, and while the public may imagine that most are dangerous criminals, the average jail detainee is expressly not a "predator who seriously threatens the lives and property of ordinary citizens" (2013/1985: 1). Jails disproportionately warehouse the poor, unemployed, and undereducated segments of society (the "rabble" in Irwin's terminology) and it is their *symbolic dishonor* and *detachment from the conventional order* that lead the police to scrutinize more closely the goings-on of the urban poor more closely than any other social groups.

There is much to suggest that Irwin's central argument is correct. Historically, public drunkenness, for instance, has been a leading cause of arrest in the United States: of the six million arrests in 1965, an estimated two million were over public alcohol consumption. In some jurisdictions, the proportion of such arrests was even higher, so that in Seattle, Washington, to take but one example, more than half of the 12,000 arrests in 1967 were on account of public

inebriation (Spradley 1970: 9). The petty character of much police-recorded crime continues. In the United States, of a total of 12,197,000 arrests in 2012, an estimated 3,146,400 arrests covered perceived offenses like vagrancy, loitering, disorderly conduct, violating liquor laws, drunkenness, and drug abuse (Puzzanchera and Kang 2014). Across the United States, the police are, to an extensive degree, relegated to the status of *social hygienists*, tasked with sweeping away the detritus of post-industrialized society from the streets and thoroughfares of the decaying urban core. The jail is merely the institutionalized extension of this function, which was created to contain *perceived problem populations*.

The Four Stages of Mortification

While not strictly speaking an ethnographic study, *The Jail* synthesizes interview data and scattered personal observations to take the reader into the "belly of the beast" and display the visceral drama and cognitive terror of detention. Inspired by Goffman's (1961) account of the process of mortification in total institutions, where newly arrived charges are gradually stripped of their worthy and honorable outside world identities, Irwin describes the transformation of detainees' identities as taking place in four distinct stages: *disintegration*, *disorientation*, *degradation*, and *preparation*.

First, *disintegration* entails that inmates lose control over property and personal belongings, social bonds to significant others, and the power to manage practical affairs. To take a mundane yet significant example, Irwin recounts how a former detainee was arrested while driving his car; the car was promptly impounded, racking up daily fees at the "pound," and upon release the owner found himself facing accumulated fees that were greater than the car's total worth. Others may fall behind on rent or lose their jobs during unwarranted absences from the workplace. The disruption that detention presents may result in extensive negative effects on the life chances

of released detainees. Even those found legally innocent may therefore pay a steep price for having the ill fortune of becoming entangled in the criminal justice system.

Second, *disorientation* refers to a psychic shift caused by the shock of arrest and subsequent confinement. Entering jail in a large US city typically entails stepping into a veritable "people-processing" machine that takes in hundreds of fresh bodies each and every day, and rubbing up against the huddled masses and wretched refuse of society. For instance, Los Angeles County Jail, the world's largest jail system, has a daily population of nearly 22,000 persons, and the LA Men's Central Jail, with its nearly 5,000 inmates, is described by the American Civil Liberties Union (2014) as a "windowless dungeon … plagued by a long-entrenched culture of savage deputy on-inmate violence."

Third, *degradation* entails stripping the detainee of their last vestiges of social prestige during arrest and booking. Arrests are not infrequently public affairs, shaming the arrestee in a communal spectacle that mounts on display the restoration of law and order in a sort of morality play. During booking and entry into the jail, various shaming rituals convert autonomous individuals into docile institutional charges.

Fourth, *preparation* involves absorbing the norms and values native to the jail milieu. Detainees who spend a sufficient amount of time behind bars come to lose inhibitions and conventional attachments. Previously horrifying sights, sounds, and smells are gradually normalized. For instance, Irwin describes a detainee who gradually accepts the normalcy of cleaning clothes in a toilet bowl. Friendships with other marginalized members of the community are formed and taken up upon release. Through a series of social psychological processes, even those detainees who have heretofore evaded the status of disreputability upon entry come to take on the worldview of the disreputable persons with which they commingle.

The Spatial Dimensions of Crime Control

Irwin emphasizes that studies of policing must attend to the spatial dimension of the surveillance of crime. Spatial bias in police work is crucial to understanding the overrepresentation of the poor and ethnic minorities on arrest records and in jail populations. While honorable and empowered citizens commit crime in locations where police choose not to work, either behind closed doors or in a manner that fails to attract the surveillant gaze of the penal state (e.g., Mohamed and Fritsvold 2011), the "disreputables commit their crimes in a much more obvious fashion than reputable people … [They] commit an enormous amount of petty crime out in the open, and the police see a great deal of it" (2013/1985: 16). Operating with a simplified model of urban space, Irwin divides the city into three quarters: respectable neighborhoods, rabble zones, and contested zones.

When disreputable persons occasionally stray into *respectable neighborhoods* their actions are monitored and sanctioned severely, even as these petty deeds would likely have gone unpoliced and unpunished were they to have taken place in downtrodden neighborhoods. Swift police reactions strive to maintain the respectability of the space.

In *contested zones*, the police and disreputables engage in a struggle over the right to monopolize urban space. The police seek to "beautify" and clean up once-derelict neighborhoods that now, for one reason or another, are to be salvaged and sanitized for up and coming professional elites. Disreputables do not fit into this scheme of urban gentrification and must therefore be forcibly escorted to their sanctioned sanctuaries. Thus, a man described how he walked through the destitute hippie quarters of Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco when he was approached by a police officer: "[A] police officer came up to me and asked if could get him some drugs. I knew he was a cop. Then he wanted me to work for him, turn in people I knew who were dealing. I wouldn't, so they busted me" (2013/1985: 13; Irwin notes that the charges were later dropped by an "order of the court").

Meanwhile, in the *rabble zone* the police do serve a socially useful function by protecting the poor from being preyed on by the poor. It could, of course, be argued that *underclass* and *rabble class* are concepts wholly unsuited to social scientific inquiry, in part because of their moral connotations, in part because they lack the possibility of operational validity across time and

space (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999: 48–50). Still, Irwin is not entirely hostile to the idea of a police force committing beneficial acts, such as protecting persons from their abusive partners.

Resolving the Jail Conundrum

If it is true that one-quarter of all jail inmates have engaged in insignificant acts of deviance, rolling back significant sections of the penal state would seem to be a feasible proposition. But Irwin pessimistically suggests that there is little hope for reforming the jail system because the public desires vengeful impositions against detainees, detesting the notion of financing luxurious conditions of incarceration. Contrary to this argument, evidence suggests that the public may favor resolving social problems and reducing penalization in response to crime. Indeed, there has *always* been a strong public awareness of the importance of excavating the social roots of criminal actions. Between 1989 and 2010, the proportion of US respondents in a survey who believed "attack[ing] social problems" was the better option for lowering the incidence of crime moved slightly upward from 61% to 64%, and the proportion who favored "more law enforcement" remained unchanged at 32% (University at Albany 2014a). Similarly, 72% of respondents in 2003 believed that the criminal justice system should work toward rehabilitating offenders (University at Albany 2014b). That leaves a landslide majority who wish to mobilize the social wing of the state against the penal wing of the state in questions of crime and justice. Such findings are liable to get lost along the way as progressive scholars of punishment bemoan the American penal behemoth (Goodman et al. 2015).

Such insights should force us to scrutinize how the three sides of the "professionals–politicians–people" triangle have interacted to produce penalization as a primary instrument of statecraft. The much-touted trope of penal populism – of which Irwin provides an early rendition – has advanced the thesis that levels of punishment soar because "the people" are desirous of such reforms (Pratt 2007). However, it is not the popular will that has produced elevated punitiveness. Instead, it is the *social uses of the people* and their alleged preferences that have legitimized harsh punishment.

Irwin's book may be viewed as an attack on conservative criminology, of which James Q. Wilson and George Kelling's influential "broken windows theory" of 1982 is a prime example. It was written at a formative moment in the history of US criminal justice. By the mid-1980s, prison populations were rapidly expanding, Republican President Ronald Reagan was overseeing a momentous neoliberal transformation of the American welfare state, and penalization as scholarly and political common sense had gained significant headway. Interestingly, Irwin finds himself agreeing with Wilson and Kelling's (1982) diagnosis that decent citizens have a fear of being "bothered by disorderly people. Not violent people, nor, necessarily, criminals, but disreputable or obstreperous or unpredictable people: panhandlers, drunks, addicts, rowdy teenagers, prostitutes, loiterers, the mentally disturbed." But while accepting this diagnosis of 1980s American urban malaise, Irwin promptly turns the insight on its head: the subjective nature of the fear of the "rabble" gains an objective status by producing spatial, ethnic, and class biases of police surveillance and leading to the decrepit nature of the jail.

On the one hand, the fear is exaggerated and overextended by police, as they sweep up disreputables who pose no real threat to others: "For the most part, they steal or hustle small amounts of money or property, and they rarely inflict serious bodily harm (occasionally a purse-snatching or mugging does result in more serious injury)" (Wilson and Kelling 1982). On the other hand, the fear of crime would best be absorbed and muted through other means than those of police raids and mass incarceration of the underclass. Rather, a true criminal justice would entail curtailing the constituency of disreputables by equitably distributing economic gains and building a strong and supportive welfare state. In other words, dealing with the perceived problem of urban offensiveness would require mobilizing all manner of agencies and policies far beyond the scope of the criminal justice system.

Irwin's lesson, then, even as it remains implicit rather than explicit, is that an ameliorated system of criminal justice could be brought about by shifting priorities away from the punitive wing of the state to its more compassionate and assistive wing.

SEE ALSO: Pains of Imprisonment; Prison Culture; Rehabilitation; Sykes: *The Society of Captives*; United States, Corrections in

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