



Robert Adams

# PRISON RIOTS IN BRITAIN AND THE USA

Consultant Editor Jo Campling

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## PRISON RIOTS IN BRITAIN AND THE USA

*Also by Robert Adams*

A MEASURE OF DIVERSION: Case Studies in I.T. (*with S. Allard, J. Baldwin and J. Thomas*)

PROBLEM SOLVING THROUGH SELF-HELP GROUPS (*with G. Lidenfield*)

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SELF-HELP, SOCIAL-WORK AND EMPOWERMENT

# Preface

The purpose of this book is to examine the history, nature, origins and outcomes of prison riots and responses to them, and to assess their significance and implications for penal policy and practice. It by no means tells the whole story of this complex subject, but complements the case studies of a handful of specific riots carried out in recent years.

The starting point for the book was the realization that to date no study had been undertaken which set alongside each other the broad experiences of prison riots in Britain and the US over the past two centuries. A number of major prison riots had led to official inquiries, and sometimes also to investigations by other groups including prisoners' movements themselves. But as a former worker in the British penal system – both as the most junior 'turnkey' at HM Prison Pentonville, and later as acting governor of a young offenders' institution – I was concerned that the traditional path of researchers into disturbances in prisons was towards confirming the maladjustment of individual prisoners rather than attempting to understand the social dimensions of incidents. Indeed, a sustained attempt at conceptualization of prison riots is notably absent from most inquiries and studies with regard, say, to the definition of riots, their histories in penal systems, the contexts in which riots arise, and the relationship between the actions of rioting prisoners and the responses of other people, including policies and practices by the governments and prison managements.

Otto von Bismarck cautioned against believing anything until it is officially denied. Prison riots are a contested concept, both in their definition and character. When I first declared an interest in prison riots, a senior official in the British Prison Department advised me that riots are not worth researching because there are hardly any real riots in prisons, only disturbances. By the time I had heard the comment repeated three or four times in different ways, my curiosity was confirmed. One of my academic colleagues used to say, once is an accident, twice may be coincidence, but three times is something else. A useful adage in penal research could be that if the authorities deny the value of studying something too strenuously, then it is probably worth examining.

This book focuses in turn on several key issues which need to be addressed, in the examination and interpretation of prison riots. It uses empirical data to that end, rather than filling the book with 'reliable' and 'valid' data on the many prison riots as an end in itself. Daniel Bell, in the classic book on *The End of Ideology*, states that his 'old-fashioned' interest is in ideas rather than in the language of social sciences, with its 'hypotheses, parameters, variables and paradigms':

I am interested in social description and in explanation, in a sketching of broad reality rather than the controlled, but abstracted, testing of hypotheses. It is not necessarily less 'scientific' than academic sociology. Nor is it really 'literary'. It is sociology as a 'perspective', as a way of becoming sophisticated about the world.

(Bell, 1960, p. 15)

This remark captures the mood of the present book, one intention of which is to set prison riots in their historical and social context and to raise for debate some key issues for people concerned about the past, present and future of prison riots, from wherever they stand.

Throughout the book, unless the specific context makes the use of other words strictly unavoidable, I have used the term 'prisoner', rather than 'inmates' or 'convicts'. This is despite the fact that many former prisons, like those of the California Department of Corrections for example, are now called 'correctional' facilities. For years, convicts were sent to prisons for punishment. When rehabilitative regimes became more common, many custodial staff had their titles changed from 'guards' to 'correctional officers', whose task was then not to punish convicts but to confine prisoners while they were rehabilitated. Over time, prisoners questioned more and more the ineffectiveness of rehabilitation, the hypocrisy of indeterminate sentences and their continual harassment and punishment by the correctional staff. Disillusioned, growing numbers of prisoners adopted an oppositional stance towards staff and convicts remained as a significant and powerful minority among them (Davidson, 1974, p. 47). I prefer to stand outside such shifts and to use the term 'prisoner' as a recognition of the captivity which all prisoners share. 'Similarly, except where the specific context requires otherwise, I use the term 'prison' as the general term to describe penal institutions for adults. This is partly for clarity and partly to counteract the tendency towards such euphemisms as 'facility', 'correctional institution' and 'center'.'

Throughout the book also, I have tried to avoid using the term America, which includes the territories of North and South America, when what is meant is the United States of America. I use the term 'Britain' to include Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, as well as England.

I cannot name individually, but acknowledge here collectively, the enormous debt this book owes to conversations and debates over the years with many prisoners. Additionally, I have found invaluable the help of many other people, including Mark Beeson, Jimmie Boyle, Paul Cavadino, Geoffrey Clarkson, Henry Cowper, Roger Dauncey, John Ditchfield, Audrey Lennox, Norman Jepson, Brian Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Max Morrison, Peter Timms, Adrian Stanley, staff in the libraries of HM Prison Service and Humberside Polytechnic, the Prison Reform Trust, the US Civil Liberties Union Prison Project, Robyn Cohen and Jo Gustafson of the US Department of Justice, and to Belinda Holdsworth and Jo Campling for their continued editorial support. Pat, Charlotte, Kirsty, Jade and George ensure that my household remains a primary stimulus of critical debate.

None of the above people have contributed to any indiscretions or mistakes in this book, which remain solely my responsibility.

ROBERT ADAMS



. . . someday we will look back upon our criminal and penal process with the same horrified wonder as we now look back on the Spanish Inquisition.

Bok, 1959, p. 50

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# 1 Prison Riots: Problems and Perspectives

The major political and historical event that marks the path of prison history is the riot.

(Berkman, 1979, p. 34)

## THE STARTING POINT

From time to time, riots in prisons have come to public attention in the form of dramatic media coverage of a wave of prison rioting or an account of a particularly violent incident in a single institution. But, for most of the two-hundred-year history of the majority of prisons, prison riots have not been in the foreground of debates about penal policy and practice.

In one sense this is not surprising, since the discontinuities in the recorded histories of prison riots point to the likelihood that gaps of several years, or even decades, often elapse between noteworthy single, or waves of, incidents (see Figure 3.1, p. 62). But when riots do occur, it is sometimes with an intensity of violence which makes their relative neglect by researchers and penal administrators over the years somewhat puzzling.

Perhaps because of this neglect, even to the informed commentator on British penal policy, the Dartmoor Mutiny of 1932 is the first significant prison riot which comes to mind, followed by the wave of riots of the early 1970s, the violent Hull prison riot of 1976 and the lengthy rooftop protest of April 1990 at HM Prison, Strangeways, Manchester, Northern England, which led to the evacuation of the entire prison for several months and the eventual rebuilding of much of the main prison complex. In the US, commentators may recall waves of prison riots in 1928–9, 1951–3 and 1968–70 and the violent incidents at Alcatraz in 1946, Attica in 1971 and the bloodiest incident in US penal history, at New Mexico State Penitentiary, Santa Fe in 1980.

This discontinuous record, marked by dramatic incidents interspersed with long silences, raises a number of questions about the character, representation and incidence of prison riots. To begin

with, there may be doubt about whether the apparent gaps in the record reflect reality or simply the vagaries of media coverage and the newsworthiness of particular kinds of story. This raises the further question as to whether, and if so why, prison riots have become more noteworthy since the late 1960s. Is this simply a feature of increased newsworthiness? Are there more prison riots than there used to be? Are incidents becoming more serious, in terms of numbers of staff and prisoners injured and killed? Are modern riots more violent and newsworthy than formerly? Is the media coverage of riots actually responsible in some way for encouraging them – copycat-style?

Behind these immediate questions lie further areas for examination. What causes prison riots? Do they arise spontaneously, independently of identifiable causes, or are they the outcome of widespread features of prisons and penal policies and structures? Are they simply indications of the brutality and thoughtlessness of prisoners, or signs of specific ills in the prison system? What is the significance of prison riots? How do the authorities respond to them? What can be learned from comparing the British and US experiences of them? Are there shared regularities in their outcomes?

This book does not set out to say the last word about all of these questions. But, whilst recognizing that many of them are interconnected and pose further questions to which there are no easy answers, it is hoped to address the major issues raised by them, directly or indirectly. In the process, it offers an interpretation of prison riots in prisons in the United States of America (US) and in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (Britain). This involves tackling the complex and difficult task of describing and explaining them, a task which is begun here, but is by no means completed in this single volume.

The sources of data are eclectic and mostly secondary, that is research reports, inquiries and investigations into riots, commentaries by penologists, case studies, surveys and sociological analyses of prisons and criminal justice systems. Use is also made of a search of *The Times* and *New York Times* indexes for the period covered by the book. The author draws also on seven years' experience working in the British penal system, through the period of the spread of prison unrest in the late 1960s and early 1970s, first as a prison officer in the HM Prison, Pentonville, London and latterly as Deputy Governor of a penal establishment. The book emerges also from many years of work in seminars and workshops on institutional and intercommunal riots with undergraduate and post-experience students, including prison staff.

The book sets alongside each other the circumstances of imprisonment in Britain and in the US. It is not simply a comparison of immediate characteristics of incidents, any more than it only presents a calendar of events, though these are important components in the development of a perspective on riots. The very concept of prison riots is contested, let alone the status of the rioters. In this light, it is important to examine how prisons, prisoners generally and especially rioting prisoners are seen, what their status is in society, what kinds of changes have taken place in the situation of prisons and in their organization, administration and description over the years and what light this casts on the subject matter of this book. Again, a full treatment of this aspect of the context of rioting is a subject in its own right, but in the present study it will be drawn on as appropriate.

The task is undertaken in three stages, of description, explanation and evaluation. These are inseparable and in many ways overlap throughout the book. But in broad terms the first part of the book in Chapters 1 and 2 tackles the problems of examining prison riots, while Chapters 3 to 5 describe and compare them in Britain and the US. Chapter 6 addresses problems of explaining how prison riots arise and finally Chapter 7 evaluates their future prospects.

## PROBLEMS OF RESEARCH

Several features of the field of study of prison riots are noteworthy: the lack of research into them, the predominance of case studies and inquiries into single incidents, and the contested nature of incidents, reflected partly in the mutually conflicting accounts given of riots by different investigators.

The quotation introducing this chapter makes the comparative neglect of prison riots by researchers throughout most of the twentieth century even more remarkable. Since the 1951–3 riots in the US (see Chapter 3), social scientists have become increasingly interested in researching prisons in general. Sykes (1957) and Cressey (1961) initiated this trend (Conrad, 1989, p. 276). Perhaps one reason for the lack of research into prison riots in particular, however, is the prior necessity to unravel definitional, conceptual and procedural problems of carrying it out. The closed nature of prisons as institutions tends to contribute to the secretiveness and defensiveness of the authorities, and compounds these three areas of difficulty.

First, the problem of definition of the field of study has been raised specifically in the area of prisoners' protests (Fitzgerald, 1977) and

labour protest more generally (Geary, 1981, p. 6). On the whole, the approach adopted here follows Geary in concentrating on collective protests. This means excluding protests by individual prisoners, such as absenteeism, from consideration in this present study. But the concept of riots is itself problematic and this makes it difficult to maintain the claim of objectivity in their study. The description of prison riots is a problem because the languages used overlap both the 'technical' and 'the transparent world of the ordinary, the everyday'. The difficulty is that 'we forget that these too are constructions of the world, and of ourselves' (Threadgold and Cranny-Francis, 1990, p. 19).

Second, there is the problem of the lack of study of protest by sociologists in particular. On the other hand, related areas such as prisoner violence have attracted much attention, especially in the period since the 1950s when rehabilitation was a popular penal philosophy, and not least from those who see disturbances involving prisoners as signs simply of the pathology of the individual.

With the exception of one notable study of US prison riots since Attica (Useem and Kimball, 1989), the increasing incidence of prison riots, reported in the media, in Britain and the US since 1968, has not been paralleled by the same enthusiasm amongst researchers for macro-sociological study of the character and significance of prison riots. Much research has been like media coverage – reactive, uncritical and atheoretical in nature. There is a notable paucity of studies which attempt at a conceptual level to relate prison riots to other aspects of penal policy and practice, let alone to criminal justice systems and the wider society. In this, the poverty of theory in relation to prison riots simply parallels the marginal place occupied by prisoners as actresses and actors in penal discourse over the centuries. Reid observes that 'most of the analyses of prison riots have consisted of reportings after the fact of a particular riot' (Reid, 1981, p. 204). Specific riots, Attica in the US (New York Special Commission on Attica, 1972) and Hull and Peterhead in Britain, have attracted case studies, perhaps partly in view of the drama and unusualness of the scale of personal violence and damage involved, but also probably for reasons of serendipity. In the case of Hull, for instance, a collaboration between a Hull academic, J.E. Thomas, and a co-founder of Preservation of the Rights of Prisoners (PROP), the prisoners' rights movement in Britain, Dick Pooley, living in Hull, produced the study (Thomas and Pooley, 1980). The Peterhead disturbances of the late 1980s were the occasion for a detailed case study of disturbances in

Scottish prisons during that period (Scrutton *et al.*, 1991). Some attention has been given to the growth of prisoners' protest organizations, for example, in Britain (Fitzgerald, 1977) and in Scandinavia (Mathiesen, 1974). In short, there exists no standard text which gives theoretical coherence to the broad study of the nature, incidence, origins and likely future of prison riots as an aspect of protest by prisoners.

Third, there is the procedural problem of getting access to valid data. They are unpredictable, complex and often too large for one observer to encompass. The unpredictability of riots inevitably leads to a dearth of direct data concerning their origins and this applies to the early stages of riots in particular. A good example of the mutual stand-off between researchers and the authorities is the relationship between Cohen and Taylor and the British Home Office, described in their book on prisoners' experiences of long-term imprisonment (Cohen and Taylor, 1972 and well documented by Jupp (1989, pp. 138-48). The issue of power also complicates research into riots. Prisoners and staff do not occupy equal places in discourse about riots, nor do they have equal opportunities to take up subject or object positions in this. The power differential between them helps to produce and sustain consequent differentials in the knowledges, meanings, values and practices concerning the different participants in discourse about prison riots, which research has the difficult task of teasing out.

The fact that riots in prisons were not systematically studied on a significant scale until well into the 1970s parallels a similar neglect of research into intercommunal rioting (Marx and Wood, 1975, p. 36). Smith, an experienced prison medical officer in Britain, argues that the singular neglect of research into other aspects of prison life includes those in which riots occur. Smith summarizes the position in Britain, at the start of an informative and unique series of almost a score of articles in the *British Medical Journal*:

Usually the scientist and the scientific journalist are presented with an abundance of information, and their task is to sort out what is reliable and what is not. When it comes to studying prisons everything is different. There are a few good scientific studies of what goes on in prisons, but they are very few and mostly old. This is partly because research is difficult in prison and partly because it has not been encouraged.

(Smith, 1983a, p. 1552)

Not surprisingly, therefore, research into prisons and prisoners is difficult to translate into direct benefits for prisoners. We need to qualify this. Whereas research which does not fundamentally challenge the status quo of penal policy and practice often has flourished, *critical* research into British prison conditions has not always received official support. The Official Secrets Act has been argued by some commentators to be one intentional means by which external critical scrutiny of prisons is discouraged (Cohen and Taylor, 1978). Taylor argues that if John Howard had been alive in the late 1970s to request permission to make his tour of prisons and write his report *The State of the Prisons*, the Home Office would have refused him permission (Taylor, 1978, p. 172).

It is arguable that in Britain the dominant management preoccupation with the control of prisoners has tended to be reinforced by the major research concerns of the Prison Psychological Service (Cohen and Taylor, 1972). Collective disturbances, especially the violent ones, tended to be seen through the methodology of positivism and behaviourism. That is, prisoners often have been observed by methods unrelated to their experience, abstracted from what is in their hearts and minds. Till the late 1960s, the story lacked an account of their conduct from what Silverman calls an action perspective (Silverman, 1970, pp. 126–7). What was missing at that stage, and what Cohen and Taylor (1972) interjected in Britain, were their feelings, their impulses and their struggles.

Similarly, in the US the nature of riots as social phenomena has tended to be displaced by research which concentrates upon the characteristics of prisoners. The racist assumptions of some of this research are barely cloaked beneath their surface statements. Thus, Goodstein and Wright comment, 'considerable research on the association of race and inmate adjustment has been conducted in recent years. Black and white inmates have been found to differ in patterns of adjustment in areas such as ethnic/racial solidarity, expression of power and violence, experience of stress, and prisonization' (Goodstein and Wright, 1989, p. 236). In studies of inmate conflict and violence, research has found that blacks are more likely to possess control and influence in daily institutional affairs (Bartollas, Miller and Dinitz, 1976) and be aggressors in conflict situations (Fuller and Orsagh, 1977). Studies relying upon official misconduct figures find that officials charge blacks with assaultive behaviour more frequently than whites (Flanagan, 1983; Poole and Regoli, 1980; Ramirez, 1984). 'In instances of sexual victimization, findings suggest that blacks are



perpetrators and whites targets' (Goodstein and Wright, 1989, p. 236). But, as Goodstein and Wright acknowledge:

Some researchers propose that apparent race differences on aggression may result from discriminatory treatment of blacks by correctional staff, thereby inflating official statistics (Poole and Regoli, 1980; Wright, 1987) and aggravating resistance among the inmates themselves (Goodstein and MacKenzie, 1984).

(Goodstein and Wright, 1989, p. 236)

Useem distances himself from Kimball, his co-author, proposing a Marxist view of prison riots, arguing that they are inextricably linked with the oppression of oppressed groups, notably blacks, over-represented in the prison system (Useem and Kimball, 1989, p. 12).

## CONTESTED NATURE OF RIOT INCIDENTS

Whereas in the US since the early 1980s the Federal Bureau of Prisons has collected data specifically on riots, in mid-1991 a senior official in the Home Office in Britain was still able to respond to the author's request for riot data with the comment: 'The Prison Department does not talk about riots, only disturbances, and the problem is that almost any incident can be called a disturbance' (personal communication). Undoubtedly, the difficulty of defining riots contributes to the problems of examining their nature, incidence and origins. This is not just a technical problem. Because of the different and often conflicting social and political standpoints of the major parties to prison riots, they remain a contested concept and a contested subject of discussion among penal commentators and practitioners. It is an oversimplification, but broadly true, that the experience of prisoners in general, and prison rioters in particular, has tended to be swamped by the voices of the authorities in commentaries on prison riots over the years.

Moreover, when set alongside each other, the versions of particular riots put forward by the authorities and the versions of them put forward by prisoners often simply cannot be reconciled. This caricatures to a degree but is a significant feature of the polarization between staff and rioters which needs to be addressed. In particular, there is a need to describe and interpret prison riots, bearing in mind the difficulty, and probably the impossibility, of ever arriving at a final account of what has happened in a particular incident. The different