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# Classism and Other Failures of the Irish Prison System: An Abolitionist Perspective

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**T**he Irish prison system is in a state of crisis as evidenced by chronic overcrowding, budgetary cuts (Delaney, 2011), high recidivism rates, endemic fear of crime, poor prisoner conditions, and, in particular, accusations of discrimination as elements of the crisis (Sim, 1994, pp. 275-276). Yet the existence of prisons remains largely unquestioned (Cavadino and Dignan, 2007, p. 75). This article, while relying on an interdisciplinary approach of critical perspectives on law, sociology, penology and criminology, uses an abolitionist perspective to determine whether prison is a viable solution in dealing with offenders

of the criminal law in the context of these failures, especially in terms of its arguable classist nature. More particularly, relative abolitionism seeks the abolition of prison for the majority of prisoners that pose no known physical danger to the public, while acknowledging the need to physically confine a minority of dangerous offenders but not in a prison-like system. The need to abolish prisons resides not only in its clear failure to reduce offending, but also in the proposed classist nature of the Irish prison system, which means the majority of prisoners are likely to come from poor socio-economic backgrounds.

The article asks; what purpose does prison supposedly serve, whether this is a valid purpose, what its impacts are, and whether it actually achieves that goal, and how prison persists if it does not achieve its aims (Scull, 1977, p. 4). Finally, the article considers whether partial abolitionism is a laudable and practical solution.

## CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LAW

This article is rooted in the critical perspectives on law (hereinafter ‘CPL’) standpoint. CPL invites us to critically assess taken for granted institutions in the legal environment from a theoretical and empirical/effectual standpoint that have thus far have remained largely unquestioned (Kelman, 1987, p. 9). One such institution that is physically and socially engrained in modern society as self-serving, self-perpetuating and self-evident is the prison. A key foundation of CPL is the lack of free will which many legal foundations rely upon, particularly the criminal law and the use of imprisonment (Kelman, 1987, p. 9).

This article looks at how the socio-economic backgrounds of criminals play a major role in why those of poorer socio-economic demographics in Ireland are more likely to be incarcerated. In the tradition of the CPL scholarship, a holistic radical overhaul of the system is proposed in the form of abolitionism, rather than a tinkering of the use of and treatment in prison within the current system.

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# THE THEORETICAL JUSTIFICATIONS FOR AND OBJECTIVES OF PRISON

## Retribution

Much legal and philosophical scholarship has been undertaken on the state's power to punish and imprison (Garland and Young, 1983, p. 11). The author agrees with the consensus amongst the majority of academics who agree that, to at least some degree, the state has the power to punish transgressors of the criminal law. However, from a CPL lens, the theoretical justifications for prisons and punishment under the criminal law (and the validity of these objectives) need to be reviewed before critically evaluating their effectiveness.

According to traditional legal thinkers, social contract theory is the theoretical basis for the criminal law itself (Cavadino and Dignan, 2007, p. 45), and retributivism the key moral justification for administering punishment (Hart, 1960, p. 21; Zedner, 2002, pp. 344-345). When an offender breaks the criminal law, he has unfairly gained an illegitimate advantage over the remaining law-abiding citizens by breaking the social contract (Cavadino and Dignan, 2007, p. 45). However, this "theory only applies if our society is a just one in which all citizens are genuinely equal. Otherwise there is no equilibrium to restore" (Cavadino and Dignan, 2007, pp. 45-46).

Criminal law infractions, as opposed to civil law breaches, can be differentiated based upon the 'moralness' supposedly associated with criminal law offences. For example, clear moral breaches of physical harm are generally universally seen as warranting the force of the criminal law, under most circumstances (Hall, Winlow and Andcrum, 2008, p. 142). However, beyond these core inherently immoral and criminal acts, it has been argued that the criminal law has become a mechanism whereby the norms and morals of one particular group in society are being imposed on another (Hall, Winlow and Andcrum, 2008, p. 142).

Different theories have been developed to provide justifications, and act as the goals for such punishment. While there are many purposes

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that are interrelated (O'Mahony, 2002, p. 13) and muddled (Sommer, 1976, p. 17), Hart's belief on the paramount nature of the grand justification of retributivism has emerged as the primary justification. However, varied justifications for prison expressed by its proponents and administrators can be divided into two main rationales – reductivism and retributivism. The prison system acts to reduce crime in some way and/or to give offenders their just desserts for gaining an illegitimate advantage by breaking the rules of the game. The commendability of prison's retributivist purpose is less clear-cut than reductivism. Beyond the inherent gut-feeling of retaliation that a criminal violation 'deserves' to be punished, a sounder justification for retributive punishment lies in the fact that the morality of the wrong must be punished as a matter of justice (Kant, referred to by Brooks, 2003, p. 206; Hart, 2008, pp. 4-5). However, punishment need not take the form of prison (Sommer, 1976, p. 45).

## **Reductivism**

The other expressed justification for punishment and prison is more practically beneficial to society. Reductivism, if achieved, does serve a valid purpose, and benefits society if deviant and harmful behaviour (which is consensually construed as criminal in nature) is discouraged. Reductivism, with its roots in utilitarianism (Brown, 2012, p. 86), can be subdivided by the manner in which prison seeks to reduce and control crime - deterrence and reform (Cavadino and Dignan, 2007, p. 37). Prison purports to provide deterrence for that particular offender (Dodge, 1979, p. 8) and other members of society by making it less attractive to commit crimes in the future (Cavadino and Dignan, 2007, p. 38). A reformist approach can reduce the incidence of crime by reforming the individual prisoner into a law-abiding citizen (Dodge, 1979, p. 8). Crime can also be reduced through the physical incapacitation that prison provides, where the offender is deprived of the opportunity to commit crime, and thus protects society (Cavadino and Dignan, 2007, p. 40). Additionally, prison can be seen as a symbolic expression, denouncing and condemning

breaches of society's moral standards (O'Mahony, 2002, p. 3). But again, this can be perceived as coming from a reductivist background, given that such condemnation seeks to reaffirm and maintain such standards (Cavadino and Dignan, 2007, p. 47).

Initially during the inception of the modern prison, reform and repentance were the primary motivations (Dodge, 1979, p. 4). Prison, in its current form, falls excessively on the side of retribution, even though the language used by politicians is framed in reductivist terms.

On balance, the author agrees with the consensus of the legal theorists that punishment can be lawful and moral under certain circumstances, and so the question of distribution of punishment becomes vital (Hart, 2008). Given that the state has the power to punish and imprison, to what extent can it do so? Beccaria believed that the answer lies again in the social contract; citizens of a state would not allow a state to punish excessively, and so proportionality is a requirement for legitimacy (Cavadino and Dignan, 2007, p. 51). The excessive (O'Mahony, 1998, p. 52) and discriminatory distribution of punishment through prison is now placing the prison, and by extension, the rule of law under question (Garland and Young, 1983, p. 140).

## **ASSESSMENT OF PRISON**

### **Failure to Achieve its Own Goals**

Research shows "the prison does not have a defence, the prison is a fiasco in terms of its own purposes" (Mathiesen, 2005, p. 141). While it is difficult to assess the success of prison in terms of retribution, it seems that prison in Ireland operates in an overly retaliatory and excessive manner (Taylor and Taylor, 1968, p. 29; Sommer, 1976, p. 194). In relation to prison's other key objective, recidivist studies have shown that prison manifestly fails to reduce crime. In 2013, 62.3% of prisoners reoffended within three years (IPS, 2013, p. 9). The ineffectiveness of general deterrence and reform is reflected in the fact that prison numbers

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since 1970s have increased relatively consistently, and yet crime levels have not increased to the same degree (O’Sullivan and O’Donnell, 2003, pp. 45-46; O’Sullivan and O’Donnell, 2001, p. 2). Not only does prison fail to reduce crime, prison itself can actually be criminogenic as a result of processes such as labelling (Shelden, and Brown, 2000, p. 58; Logan, 2008, pp. 10-11; Clear, 1996, p. 5; Sommer, 1976, p. 45; Cayle, p. 1988, p. 1). A key reasons its failure to reduce crime and “reform most prisoners (is) because we fail to deal with the systemic social and economic causes and inequities which contribute to criminality” (Logan, 2008, p. 237; IPRT, 2012, p. 12; National Crime Council, 2002, p. 30). At the crux of the argument in this article is that prison is not only a symptom of poverty, but a driver of it.

## **Classism**

Not only does prison fail to meet its own objectives, it has separate negative effects in by operating in a classist manner (Logan, 2008, p. 237).

### *How Classism Operates*

1. The drafting of the criminal law can criminalise the lifestyle of those from poor socio-economic backgrounds (IPRT, 2012, p. 11; Gustafson, 2009, p. 714). Cavadino and Dignan argue that the legislature’s bias (Cavadino and Dignan, 2007, pp. 68 and 73) has a tendency to leave the interests of the powerless unaccounted for, as evident in the criminalisation of begging (IPRT, 2012, p. 11), drugs, prostitution and other offences such as drunk and disorderly (Kelman, 1987, p. 97). Many of these offending behaviours can be seen, from the perspective of offenders for such offences (the majority of whom are of poor socio-economic background) as alternative sense-making tools (as opposed to the mainstream tool of consumption) or as attempts to make a living in order to consume (as opposed to legitimate sources of income) (Hall, Winlow and Andcrum, 2008, pp. 11, 13, 17 and 34). From the perspective

of the public, they can be perceived as “annoyance” crimes, albeit framed in a ‘protectionist’ manner (Ellickson, 1996, p. 1181).

2. The implementation of criminal law also has a disproportionate effect on the poorer classes. Discretionary selective police enforcement of the law in working-class neighbourhoods (Mulcahy and O’Mahony, 2005, p. 30; Shelden, and Brown, 2000, p. 59), and judicial bias can lead to a higher likelihood that citizens from poor socio-economic backgrounds will get arrested, convicted and receive harsher sentences (Bacik, 1998, pp. 19 and 21; Shelden, and Brown, 2000, p. 58; Neitz, 2013, p. 148). Discrepancies emerge in the prosecution of ‘white collar’ fraud criminals compared to other property related crimes (IPRT, 2012, p. 14; Department of Justice and Law Reform, 2010, p. 36; O’Donnell, 1997, p. 33). Similarly, up until very recently the operation of the courts system in relation to the imprisonment for the failure to pay debts or court fines clearly had a more onerous effect on the poor who are less likely to be able to repay despite no differential in terms of behaviour (IPRT, 2012, p. 9; IPS, 2013, p. 21). This discrepancy in the criminal law was, however, recognised in Section 19 of the Fines (Payment and Recovery) Act 2014 that introduces a presumption of community service orders upon failure to pay a fine. Imprisonment should only arise where the Court deems it not possible to make a community service order or a community service order is not complied with. The IPRT do however point to certain failings of the new legislation, in particular its impact on poorer sections of the community. For instance, note that the ability to pay fines via instalments is restricted to fines over a value of €100 despite that some families may struggle to make a lump sum payment of up to €100 (IPRT, 2014).

3. It is submitted that it is more difficult for the poor to refrain from breaking the criminal law, particularly in relation to its protection of private property (Cavadino and Dignan, 2007, p. 47; Healy and others, 2013, pp. 16 and 41). This comes about as a result of the unequal distribution of wealth brought about by “accident of birth” (O’Mahony, 2002, p. 5). The criminal law can perpetuate this inequality by prohibiting ‘illegitimate’ appropriation of the current holders’ property, and by making the “fundamental crime of capitalist society, the expropriation of property” (Taylor and Taylor, 1968). Indeed, property related offences

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of theft, robbery, burglary, fraud and property damage made up 20.5% of new committals to Irish prison (IPS, 2013, p. 25). Society's obsession with property, and its inherent value to the being, has reached new heights in the consumerist era (Bauman, 2004, pp. 82 and 116). Such property related offences are an attempt by the 'underclass' (Hall, Winlow and Andcrum, 2008, p. 4; O'Mahony, 1997, p. 61), who are denied access to the social capital (such as education and other support) that would otherwise entitle them access to such consumer goods, to participate in the societal need of consumerism ((Garland and Young, 1983, p. 133; (Hall, Winlow and Andcrum, 2008, pp. 34, 35, and 39). Indeed, Hall et. al., make a fascinating argument that low level criminality has increased as a means to participate as a consumer, which gives all citizens meaning and identities in modern life ((Hall, Winlow and Andcrum, 2008, p. 7). This argument is a departure from the traditional Marxist criminological hypothesis where most instances of crime are perceived as class battles and expressions of the proletariat's frustration with the system (Taylor and Taylor, 1968). The former is more applicable to modern Irish society. Given that the essence of one's being and identity is now expressed through conspicuous consumption of designer branded goods, the innately unequal opportunities and distribution of wealth based on accident of birth allows the upper-half of society (who are productive and gain income to consume) to engage with society, leaving the underclass without the means of becoming fulfilled (Reza Barmaki, 2009, p. 261); except through crime (Hall, Winlow and Andcrum, 2008, pp. 7, 10, and 34). Most crimes are now committed out of economic necessity—necessary in consumer culture does not mean to physically survive, but to survive socially in a world of conspicuous consumption; or as a form of escapism from the daily reminders of 'losing' in such a competitive world ((Hall, Winlow and Andcrum, 2008, pp. 7, 11, 13 and 17).

### *Evidence of Classism*

Irish statistical data supports the assertion that the criminal law, criminal justice system and prison system disproportionately impacts

and criminalises the poor. O'Mahony calls these "undeniable facts" (O'Mahony, 2003). Numerous domestic studies have expressed the disproportionate imprisonment of those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds (O'Mahony, 1998, p. 55; O'Mahony, 1997, p. 39 and 61; Quinlan, 2011, p. 243; O'Donnell, and others, 2007, p. 3); as well as the tendency for prisoners to exhibit characteristics indicative of poverty or deprivation, including low levels of education (Morgan and Kett, 2003, p. 45; O'Mahony 1997, p. 57; Seymour and Costello, 2005, p. 52), unemployment (O'Mahony, 1998, p. 55; O'Donnell and others, 2008, p. 130; Mc Hugh, 2013, p. 6), addiction problems (Carr, and others 1980, p. 459; O'Mahony 1997, chapter 5), mental health (Kennedy, and others, 2004, p. 17; O'Mahony, 2002, 5; Carmody and McEvoy, 1996, p. 20), and homelessness (Hickey, 2002).

The geographic dispersion of prisoners' addresses in 2011 (IPS, 2011, p. 20) is indicative of this trend when compared to the most recent Census in 2011. The notoriety of inner-city communities in Dublin and Limerick as criminogenic areas is backed up by these statistics (McNamara, and others, 2011, p. 251). Dublin accounted for 27.7% of Ireland's total population in the 2011 Census, and yet almost a third (32.4%) of committals to prison gave Dublin as their residence. Again, Limerick accounted for 4.2% of the Irish population, but 7% of Irish prisoners were from Limerick. Incorporating unemployment rates into this analysis is also useful. Limerick and Dublin were designated as having the most unemployment 'blackspots' in 2011 (CSO 2012, p. 19), with Limerick City having the highest unemployment rate in Ireland at 28.6% (CSO, 2012, p. 17). When applying the same analysis to other groups in prison, foreign nationals (CSO, 2012, p. 25; IPS, 211, p. 20) and Irish travellers (Drummond and Quirke, 2010, p. 134) are overrepresented in prison, again related to their unemployed and poverty status.

### *Why Classism Exists*

While a conspiracy against the poor is not being alleged, a tacit exploitation of the poor for political and power purposes exists in

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Ireland. Prison, its architecture and its raw materials (the poor) act as physical representations and proof of political promises to find a solution to the endemic fear of crime and to criminal sections of the population ((Mathiesen, 2005, p. 143). Prison is being used not only to gain votes (Schollosser, 1998, pp. 4-5), but on a more subversive level is dividing society in two. The hallowing out of the middle class leaves the privileged upper classes on one side (the interests of whom the politicians represent) and the poor on the other. The criminal law and prison (Cavadino and Dignan, 2007, p. 74) play key roles in the process of making the lines between 'us' and 'them' ((Shelden, and Brown, 2000, p. 49), the 'useful' and 'useless' (Spitzer, 1975, p. 647), more pronounced. The underclass are economically redundant in a globally competitive Irish economy which is delineated along the lines of highly skilled jobs and low end service jobs (Bauman, 2004, p. 83; Mauer, 2005, p. 609). The former traditional jobs of the working class in lowly skilled manufacturing have been eradicated and off-shored to cheaper locations (Hall, Winlow and Andcrum, 2008, pp. 4 and 23). The underclass, who are largely unemployed, are a surplus population in capitalist society, and certain portions can pose a threat to economic growth (Logan, 2008, pp. 38-39; Zedner, 2009, p. 87). McMahan and Roberts note the ongoing transition shift from a welfare to a criminal justice state characterised by inequality (2008, p. 1). Prison and the criminal justice system (hereinafter 'CJS') serve to deal with the volatile segments of society (Bauman, 2004, p. 116; (Shelden, and Brown, 2000, p. 58; O'Mahony, 2002, p. 620), whom Spitzer called the social dynamite (1975, p. 646). By predominantly criminalising young men [almost half, of the total prison population are males under 30 (IPS, 2013, p. 20)] from poor socio-economic backgrounds, social inequality is exacerbated with the poor in general being tainted with the label of criminality and treated as a homogenous group (Bauman, 2004, p. 82). It is arguable that certain aspects of the criminal justice, judicial and political processes discussed in this article culminate in the criminalisation of poverty (Bauman, 2004, p. 82; Bauman, 1997, p. 44).

While the complex intricacies of the direct links between poverty, criminalisation and ways of life should not be underplayed and a more nuanced multitude of factors are at play, it nonetheless is an argument

with some weight. Logan describes the phenomena as the “social apartheid” of the poor (2008, p. 98).

## ABOLITIONISM

Having considered the appropriateness and morality of the objectives of prison, as well as its intended, actual and other effects, it is apparent that prison is an untenable option. It is an inappropriate and ineffective tool to deal with, first, the surplus populations (the poor), and secondly, offenders who not only fail to become more contributing and law-abiding citizens, but whose criminal tendencies are often exacerbated in prison. We should bear in mind here the other unintended collateral consequences to the wider community (Breen, 2010, p. 47).

Any effective alternative to prison will inevitably involve a number of key fundamental changes in different sectors of society, not limited to the CJS (Davis, 2003, p. 111). A complete re-appraisal of how we deal with violators of the criminal law and the non-productive in society is needed (Davis, 2003, p. 113). However, the most immediate concern, particularly for the poor who are most directly impacted, is the removal of prison from the social landscape (Davis, 2003, pp. 108-109). The abolitionist perspective is useful in attempting to envisage and implement such sweeping changes throughout society. It seeks to address the underlying roots of crime, without perpetuating the divide and power imbalance by oppressing the underclass through the use of imprisonment.

The abolitionist perspective should be set apart from the prison reform and decarceration movements. It involves a more radical and systemic overhaul of society (Davis, 2003, p. 9; Logan, 2008, p. 299). The failures of the latter movements have removed legitimacy from possible open discussion on the merits of an abolitionist solution (Martinson, 1974, p. 25; Davis, 2003, p. 100). For example, the net-widening effect of certain reformist alternative programs has not only expanded the carceral archipelago into society (Foucault, 1977, p. 301), but actually diverted offenders into the CJS and prison (Scull, 1977, p. 179).

Proposals to close prisons are likely to meet widespread public and

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institutional defiance on foot of the failures of the previous movements; a misunderstanding of what abolitionism entails, and certain vested interests (the Irish version of the Prison-Industrial Complex, involving primarily politicians and the mass media who use the fear of crime and criminals to gain votes and consumers (The National Crime Council, 2009, p. 21)). Scull describes the likely reaction to a proposal of abolitionism from such actors and the general public - “(t)o allow criminals violate the law, with something approaching impunity, significantly weakens the incentives to conform while simultaneously provoking public outrage. It is likely to trigger vigilante responses, thus threatening the state’s monopoly of legal violence... undermin(ing) the legitimacy of a social and political order” (Scull, 1977, p. 180). This is an example of how critics of the abolitionist movement often misinterpret what penal abolitionism involves; relative abolitionism is probably a more apt and informative term. Relative abolitionism still involves the destruction of prison and any prison-like alternatives, but does concede that “incapacitation of some kind or another will still need to be reserved for society’s most violent” criminals (Logan, 2008, p. 239). This small minority of criminals who actually pose a danger to society, such as those sentenced for assaults, homicides and sexual crimes should still be restrained. However, the relative abolitionist solution does allow for the reintegration into society “for a substantial percentage of the imprisoned population” (Davis, 1994, p. 430).

The physical institutions of prison should be shut down. Any prisoner sentenced for dangerous offences, those who will actually pose a threat to society, must be relocated to “something other than cages or fortress(es)”, such as entirely new incapacitative homes or communal compounds (Logan, 2008, p. 239). These offenders should be afforded the same human rights as other citizens so far as they are not required to be forfeited in order to protect society. They should also be assumed to be capable of changing their ways (Kelman, 1987, p. 88) and being capable of being contributing members of society in the future. In this regard, they should receive treatment (anger management, addiction, counselling etc) that tackles the causes of the crime for which the offender was prosecuted (Logan, 2008, pp. 89 and 93). The determination in regards to their liberty

and perceived threat to society should be re-evaluated periodically by a panel of jurors (Sommer, 1976, p. 16).

An amnesty should be not only granted to former prisoners to allow them truly integrate into society and employment without permanent labelling, but also to current prisoners sentenced for non-dangerous crimes (IPRT, 2012, p. 20). This would account for 65% of Ireland's prison population (IPS, 2013, p. 21). They should be de-institutionalised as a matter of priority and re-immersed into their communities. The savings from the current cost of €165,5396,524 housing of these 2,531 prisoners [at €65,404 per annum (IPS, 2013, p. 2)], should be invested in a variety of programs of which offenders must avail of. These programs should address the underlying issues of criminality and poverty such as education, training, addiction etc. They would operate alongside the Community Service Order hours, which would also be compulsory and increasing in length relative to severity of punishment in order to provide some general deterrent value and retribution on the part of society (Walsh and Sexton, 1999, p. 98).

In order to bring about a less discriminatory and classist society, abolitionists argue that other societal and criminal law changes will be needed in conjunction to penal abolitionism, such as the challenges posed by the decline of the welfare state (Wilkinson, 2008) as well as the decriminalisation of drugs and prostitution - which are two examples of a quasi-criminalisation of the lifestyle of the underclass (Davis, 2003, pp. 108-110; Parenti, 1999, p. 242). Furthermore, by reserving prison solely for dangerous prisoners, the poor will be less likely to violate the criminal law both in the future (given the criminogenic effect of prison in many cases), and more importantly in the first instance due to incarceration for drugs and non-violent offences.

## CONCLUSION

Relative penal abolitionism, and the concurrent societal changes, can provide a viable solution to how we deal with those who violate the criminal law according to whether they are in need of help, or should

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be incapacitated for the safety of others. It also provides an avenue for finding less punitive and more appropriate ways of dealing with those who fail to 'make it' in consumer society as evidenced by wealth and consumption. Abolitionism has been labelled a utopian notion (Herbert, 2008), but surely a utopian society is one worth discussing and striving for? The public are acutely aware of some of the failings of prison discussed in this article such as unsatisfactory conditions and its inability to reduce crime (Brown, 2008, p. 61). Yet, institutional vested interests in maintaining the prison myth mean that the public are unwilling to confront some of the deeper social inequality issues at the heart of the prison system, and continue to demand more punitive sanctions to crime without appreciating the socio-economic causes of it, nor indeed its criminogenic and other negative effects. Abolitionism as an academic discourse may not immediately be enforceable in Irish society, but certain trends internationally and domestically suggest that public and political appetite for decarceration in this regard is increasing. However, decarceration will be insufficient to remove the classist effects of the CJS; relative penal abolitionist is a preferential approach.

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