



Boys' zone stories: Perspectives from a young men's prison

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Rod Earle

The Open University, UK

Abstract

This article explores aspects of young men's gender identities as they serve time in an English Young Offender Institution. Based on qualitative research, the article discusses three dimensions of the way the young men talk about their lives, inside and outside prison. It is argued that the evocation of a specific condition of being '*on road*' is linked to forms of youthful masculine collectivity, '*my boys*', which valorize pre-modern forms of martial masculinity. These two themes converge in the pre-eminence of '*postcode pride*', the salience of 'the local' in the young men's accounts of themselves. These aspects of the young men's experience are explored with reference to other recent research findings on young men's experience of 'gang' activity and living on the social margins.

Keywords

boys, ethnography, gender, masculinity, prison

In this article I explore the way young men in an English prison talk about their lives. I consider what their accounts can tell us about aspects of gender relations, about men and about prison. It remains an uncontroversial empirical reality that men make up over 90 per cent of most prison populations. They are, almost exclusively, men of the social and economic margins rendered 'manageable' in western society by an emerging penal state (Wacquant, 2009).

Within the relatively extensive field of penal scholarship it remains rare for the social relations of gender to feature as an analytical framework of men's penal predicaments. Within the rather less extensive, but growing, field of masculinity studies it is unusual for the penal landscape to feature prominently despite its physical presence and symbolic

Corresponding author:

Rod Earle, Dept Health and Social Care, The Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK
Email: r.earle@open.ac.uk

weight in men's lives, particularly those of the social and economic margins (for exceptions, see Sabo et al., 2001). Even though the population of young men in youth justice systems and custodial institutions heavily outnumber the population of young women, and that this substantial disparity continues to increase with age, gender remains analytically absent from the explanatory lexicon of men's offending and the State's response. This critical blind-spot is all the more surprising given the explicit focus on changing and moulding the identities of young men that prevails in custodial institutions. As Goffman (1991 [1961]: 22) points out, total institutions such as prisons and asylums, 'are the forcing houses for changing persons; each is a natural experiment on what can be done to the self'. As subsequent generations of scholars have laboured to point out, prisons are institutions suffused with ideology and power, though they are labours from which considerations of gender as ideology and power are curiously absent, unless the subjects happen to be women (Carlen, 1983).

Even though an emerging literature identifies linkages between aspects of masculinity and aspects of crime, and indeed crime control (Collier, 1998; Jefferson, 1993, 1994, 1996; Messerschmidt, 1993, 1997, 2005; Newburn and Stanko, 1994) it is more common for gender analysis to be applied to the 'minority' experience of women in the criminal justice system. Though the reasons for this focus on women's experiences are entirely appropriate, urgent and necessary (see Fawcett Society, 2009) the logical corollary of considering men's penal experience as integral to the social relations of gender remains rare. As Sim (1994) notes, what tends to be missing among the literature is a focus on 'prisoners as men' rather than 'men as prisoners'. It is to these issues of men's identities in prison that this article is addressed.

Using contemporary theorization of masculinities as a framework and the principles of reflexive ethnography (Willis, 1997 [1976]) as a guide, I seek to convey something of the young men's ideas about their lives and my understandings of their context in relation to Carlen's (1983: 15) observation that the meanings of imprisonment are to be found not so much inside the prison walls as 'within traditional forms of conviviality and ethics of domesticity and masculinity'.

I begin by sketching the conceptual framework of gender that informs the analysis, before going on to explore the methodological exigencies of the prison fieldwork. I then consider how some findings from this fieldwork correspond with other recent research exploring marginalized young men's criminalized and violent conduct (Gunter, 2008; Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009; Pitts, 2008).

All about the Boys – Young Masculinities

A prominent aspect of public (and academic) discourse on gender is that men are in crisis, squeezed by a changing economy and the long march of women into positions of social and economic power once the exclusive preserve of men (Segal, 1990). The social anxiety that characterizes the thesis of 'men-as-threatened-by-change' finds expression in concerns about their role in family life, as fathers, in higher rates of divorce and a greater propensity to suicide, men's poorer health, reluctance to access health services, shorter life-span and supposed 'emotional illiteracy'. Boy's apparent educational underachievement and young men's over-representation in crime are given as indicators of their struggle to adjust to these unique modern times (COMAB, 2009).

Men, in this crisis schema, become the passive/aggressive victims of change, largely bereft of agency and, in their youth, rather ironically, at the mercy of their hormones. Risk taking is driven by testosterone, as are sexual urges that find 'natural expression' in attraction to girls and sexual adventuring. Surging 'male energy' finds 'outlets' in sport, particularly football, as well as fighting and general trouble at school. Conflict with social authority in the form of parents and police becomes inevitable 'as adolescent males feel their power and try to establish their independence' (Connell, 2005: 12). In short, male adolescence is the time when boys emerge from the ' Sturm und Drang' of puberty, and their 'innate' masculinity comes to the fore. This, loosely speaking, is a 'feminization' thesis that offers simple reverse pathologies and gender inversions in lieu of an engagement with the epistemological and empirical complexity of gender (see Haywood et al., 2005).

The arenas of a specifically masculine adolescence are now subject to greater sociological scrutiny (Frosh et al., 2002; Kimmel, 2008) and one of the emerging themes is how, and whether, 'boyiness' can or should be subsumed within the rubric of masculinities. According to Haywood et al (2005) 'boyiness' may be a key site of contestation of ideas about what it is to be a man, a significant field in the array of gender possibilities rather than a stage of mechanical transition from child to adult male or another dimension of a simple gender dichotomy.

Historical studies of masculinity indicate how understandings of 'manliness' in Victorian times rested as much on their distinction from children as it did from that of women. Children occupied the Victorian and Edwardian imagination as creatures of both wonder and horror, bestial and ethereal. The masculine premium that was placed on self-control and 'character' were regarded as largely absent in children, resulting in a heavy, and much more open, preoccupation with the issues of transforming boys into men. Preachers, schoolmasters and novelists, such as Rudyard Kipling, were explicit in their concern to school or drill the nation's male youth towards manliness. Their candour about the effort needed to 'make men manly' belies the current reticence surrounding appropriate forms of masculine maturity (see Tosh, 2005).

In the prison study reported here, the idea of young men as 'boys', that is, male, but not men, loomed large, as this remark from a prison officer at the outset of the study suggests:

That's what makes this age group so difficult. Some are just so ... so difficult. Especially the 18-year-olds. They are the worst I think. Still, emotionally, children really. But in a man's body. I think it's after 21, about 24 I reckon, that you notice change, a bit of sense emerging. (HMYOI Rochester Prison Officer, Unrecorded conversation, RE Fieldnotes, 2 August 2006)

Although clearly not a novel phenomenon, this anxious vocabulary of masculine transition resonates with the new sense of crisis in which a 'palpable sense of threat pervades our images of masculinity and men' (Weeks, 2005: 53).

Qualitative Methods, Ethnographic Intentions

This article presents aspects of young men's experience of a Young Offender Institution (HMYOI Rochester in Kent) that houses nearly 400 young men aged between 18 and 21.

HMYOI Rochester is situated on the Thames estuary just beyond the M25 London orbital. It lies close to the eastern edge of the largest, most cosmopolitan city in England while also being adjacent to one of its most famous and symbolic 'rural idylls'; Kent is commonly known as the 'garden of England'. Located in the small village of Borstal just outside the port of Rochester, it is the site of the original Borstal Institution established by the Prevention of Crime and the Children Acts of 1908. Much of the accommodation dates from that time. HMYOI Rochester's continued physical presence as a thriving, full-to-the-brim, custodial institution, with two new neighbours in the form of the Medway Secure Training Centre and Cookham Wood Women's Prison,¹ is eloquent testimony to the trajectories of crime and punishment over the ensuing 100 years. As a Young Offender Institution (YOI) specifically for young men aged 18–21 it directly reflects the persistent concern to distinguish 'the men from the boys' and, more specifically, those Edwardian projects of making boys into men. Borstals were but one element of these programmes, focusing on masculine 'delinquency' and designed to buttress 'the nation against degeneracy' in a critical period of colonial confidence (Bradley, 2008; Meyer, 2009). Imperial masculinities were oriented towards the demands of maintaining Britain's global colonial project and put a premium on building self-control, character and physical deportment. Hence, the Borstal regime, as it became known, of developing rugged personal physicality combined with a collective 'workmanlike' self-discipline. In both the Victorian era, and even more so in the Edwardian period that followed, the transformation of boys into men was an explicit social project, manifest not just in the popularity of 'Boys Own' story books and comics, but public schools and correctional institutions such as Borstals.

Researchers, the author and the principal investigator, Coretta Phillips, attended the HMYOI Rochester for three to four days each week, over a period of eight months during the latter half of 2006. A relatively long-term period of access to the prison was deemed necessary to develop understandings of the depth and range of prisoners' experience. The eight month period of fieldwork provided an opportunity to appreciate the flux and flow of prison life over a reasonably sustained period of time. During the course of the fieldwork 60 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a representative sample of the prison population, in terms of religion, nationality and ethnicity. Part of the sample was drawn from informal contacts established during the fieldwork but to avoid selection bias, for example talking only to 'talkative' or confident prisoners, just under half the sample was drawn at random from the prison roll.

The young men were provided with information explaining the intentions of the research and the procedures for establishing their consent to be interviewed, and their unconditional right to withdraw participation at any stage. Consent to involvement in the wider research could, however, only be minimal as the permission to conduct fieldwork for the ESRC funded study of identity, ethnicity and social relations in prison was granted by the prison administration rather than the prisoners themselves. No prisoners expressed reservations to us about this consent procedure, though a few declined to be interviewed. The implicit invasion of their 'suspended' rights to privacy/non-involvement seemed to be received as a 'given fact' of the routine surveillance that accompanies prison living.

Interviews and fieldnotes were entered in Nvivo 7, a qualitative data analysis software package that facilitates the coding, co-ordination and analysis of large amounts of data.

The analysis involved categorizing the data generated from observational notes, reflections in field diaries and interviews. Each respondent is identified according to basic parameters of ethnicity, nationality and faith to facilitate appreciation of the diversity of the research population. The prison receives convicted prisoners from an area that includes the massive and diverse population of London, as well as the smaller, dispersed and less ethnically diverse populations of Kent, Essex and East Sussex. According to prison service records the inmate population of HMYOI Rochester at the time of the research was composed of: 56 per cent White British, White European, White Other; 30 per cent Black/Black Caribbean/Black African; 7 per cent Mixed Heritage; 6 per cent Asian. The specific significance of ethnicity to the social relations of men's prison life, and its intersection with other forms of identification, is discussed by Earle and Phillips (2009) and Phillips (2008).

The analysis of interview and other fieldwork data indicated the presence of several significant themes in the young men's talk, such as the three discussed, below, in this article. I suggest that the repeated evocation of the experience of being 'on road' is linked to forms of youthful masculine collectivity, signalled by the term 'my boys', that appear to valorize pre-modern forms of martial masculinity. These two themes converge in the pre-eminence of 'postcode pride', the salience of 'the local' in the young men's accounts of themselves.

All three draw from the semantic motifs used by the young men in their talk about their experiences. Their correspondence with other recent research on young men's 'gang' experiences in London (Gunter, 2008; Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009; Pitts, 2008) is also discussed.

'On Road' – Some Detours Ahead

In fieldwork interactions and interviews there were a number of recurring and unavoidable themes that peppered the young men's talk with researchers. Among these was a continual reference to a modality of life and experience prior to, and beyond, the prison – 'life on road':

The other day I was speaking to, to a guy in my place of work, he said 'In a way I'm happy to be in prison because it's like road is not too safe'. He told me the other day his best friend, his best friend got shot. He's dead now. And may be if he was on road he could have got shot as well and his younger brother got shot in the leg as well. (R29; Black, Foreign National, Christian)

All the time, the same things, what they do on road, who they chill with, how big they are, how many straps they got, fire arms, how much money they're worth, how many girls they own, just the same kind of things. They're trying to big themselves up and the people they hang round, they're trying to big their people up, all on road. (R51; Asian, British National, Muslim)

Well, I haven't seen no loyalty in here compared to what I'm used to seeing out on road between me and my boys, you know what I mean. (R28; White, British National, Christian)

Hallsworth and Silverstone (2009: 365) are also prompted to comment on the recurrence of this motif among the young men who are the respondents in their study of violent

urban 'gangs'. They suggest the term 'on road' 'constituted a liminal space where [the men] could find some kind of authentic sovereignty, freedom from the constraints they experienced at the hands of a hostile society ... a place where you became a sovereign agent'. According to Hallsworth and Silverstone (2009: 365), "'On Road" was a place where it was possible to transcend the limits of rule-based society and enjoy the fleeting sense of empowerment this can bring.' Although I share their evident fascination for the work this evocative term is doing I remain unconvinced that liminality is either a sufficient or even appropriate concept to account for the experiences or condition being alluded to. Whether it is transcendence or transgression, this analysis emphasizes an episodic character to what might be a more persistent and pervasive set of dispositions. Its invocation of an 'authentic sovereignty' and 'freedom from constraints' affords grace and dignity to what might otherwise be seen as panicky, chaotic, adrenalin-fuelled edgework experiences (Lyng, 2004).

The motif certainly attracts a particular resonance in the stultifying stasis of prison that the young men talked about, but its widespread use beyond the confines of prison suggests it functions neither as a comparative term, nor one referring to occasional intense experiences. In this section I explore the symbolism of the term 'on road' and consider whether its associations may help to illuminate aspects of contemporary young masculinities and their cultural legacies.

'On Road' has a variety of cultural connotations associated with the tropes of children's transition to adulthood (Janssen, 2009), but also powerfully recalls white American men's romanticization of 'the frontier', 'the road' and 'the wilderness'. You can find reference to its relevance to prison life, and to men in general, in the liner notes, addressed to prisoners, on Johnny Cash's recording 'At Folsom Prison':

All of you have the same things snuffed out of your lives, every thing it seems that makes a man a man – women, money, a family, a job, the open road, the city, the country, ambition, power, success, failure – a million things.

As Rutherford (1999) reflects young men in the West rarely daydream or eulogize on the prospect of a settled, domestic existence. They tend to identify with an imaginary landscape populated by stories of action, travel and adventure, frequently involving, if only implicitly, the leaving off of home and mothers, an open ended domestic departure without destination. Embarking on a journey, 'going on road', is also, in both myth and folk-lore, a powerful part of what allows a man to change. It is, as Marina Warner (1994) points out in her Reith lectures, one of the oldest of all stories. In the USA of the 1950s it most famously found expression in the Beat Poets' rejection of the constraints of Cold War, white, 'middle-American' manhood. For Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Neil Cassidy being 'on the road' was their metaphor for freedom, the title and narrative thread of Kerouac's most famous book: 'somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything' (cited in Rutherford, 1999: 16). The visions 'the road' activates are those of freedom of movement and choice but they are also solitary, individualistic, freedoms, conditional release from a sense of social encumbrance and wider emotional commitments, as much as they are a release from white, middle-American post-war conventions (Van Elteren, 1999). The salience of 'road' and travel metaphors more

generally rests on a highly gendered, masculine, experience of the world, one which erases differential 'access to the road' (Wolff, 1993: 229). It is an image that apparently pulls most heavily on 'the hearts of men' (Ehrenreich, 1983).

Perhaps the mild sense of exasperation in the second quotation above by a young man of Asian heritage indicates a level of ethnic detachment from this heavily romanticized western myth image. As the first quotation indicates, and Hallsworth and Silverstone's (2009) article vividly corroborates, life 'on road' can be very harsh, even deadly. In this respect, being 'on road' clearly refers to other familiar vernaculars for life on the urban margins, the life of 'the street' and of 'hustle'. Gunter (2010) also identifies the culturally specific experiences of 'liming'. This is a Caribbean term for loafing around the streets and yards, a general way of being out and about and 'on the make', albeit in a slightly disreputable manner. Gunter suggests that the diffusion of domestic African Caribbean community habits into the wider, youthful, urban communities of London have seen this way of 'being around' taking on a specific status, now corresponding to being 'on road'.

Paradoxically, for some young men the simplicities and relative stasis of prison life were taken as respite from the more mundane but challenging realities of domestic life, as the observations of this young man indicate:

But when, if, I leave here, I'm gonna think whose gonna wake me up in the morning? Where am I going to get my medication from? Where's my money coming from? Know what I mean? It's, it's all easy. Then you get through the door, then you think, get your electricity bill, get your gas bill, get your phone bill, get your council tax, your TV licence, you got all these bills to pay, you know what I mean. I ain't, I ain't never paid a bill in my life. It [the prison] looks after everything ... You don't have to go and buy no food because it's already bought and made for you. It's all been done for you. It's like you don't really have to have no complicated situations like you have on road. You ain't got no worries of the females coming, and whatever. (R13; White, British National, Nil Religion)

This portrayal of prison as a simple, stable and institutional refuge bears testimony not only to the kinetically charged velocity and complexity of life outside prison 'on road', and some of its visceral appeals and daunting challenges (Katz, 1988; Lyng, 2004; Presdee, 2000), it also suggests the equally daunting qualities attached to mundane domestic responsibilities. Both are suggestive of the difficulty some young men have in finding other viable ways of being, other modalities of urban adolescent masculinity (Frosh et al., 2002). The young man quoted above refers to the efficacy of medication prescribed to help him cope with depression, a condition that preceded him, if not propelled him, into prison. In the predictable routines of prison life and the steady drip of medication he finds his condition both manageable and effectively managed.

Recent longitudinal studies of childhood and youth indicate the centrality of mobility to the 'material and symbolic practices through which young people move from the status of children to that of adults' (Thomson and Taylor, 2005: 328). For bourgeois cosmopolitans, the 'kinetic elite', the horizons on offer are wider, the 'road' less hazardous, involving comfortable travel, mobile working, secure incomes and multiple domestic possibilities. It involves the comfort and certainty of arrival as well as the excitement of departure. For the young men in HMYOI Rochester, and those of Hallsworth and Silverstone's study (see also those of Gunter, 2008, 2010; Pitts, 2008), the kinetic

underclass, the appeal of life 'on road', with its 'live fast, die young/get rich quick or die trying' mottos, offers the armour of an alienating identity in a world where the State, the formal economy and family life can find no place for them, nor they in them. Or perhaps only one place. In this respect they bear a striking resemblance to Beier's (1985) description of 'masterless men', the vagrants, vagabonds and brigands of medieval society. As Beier notes this dislocated segment of the population drifted across Europe between the end of the Middle Ages and the rise of the modern, Westphalian State. They were seen as 'a menace to the social order because they broke with the accepted norms of family life. If the ideal was the patriarchal household, they had no place in it, and for that reason they were considered pariahs' (Beier, 1985: 51; see also Bowling and Weber, 2008; Wacquant, 2009). Aspects of the salience of the collective dimensions of these current and historical forms of masculinity are discussed below.

'My Boys' – a Medieval Register to Martial Adolescent Collectivities?

Another recurring motif of the young men's talk at HMYOI Rochester was the continual use of the phrase 'my boys' to refer to a loose, but close and relatively significant collectivity of male friends and associates. The origins of the current popularity of the term may lie in the status attached to African American hip-hop, rap, r'n'b music and fashion styles which crossed the Atlantic in the late 1980s. The term 'homeboy', for example, is associated with urban and black American youth as a way of referring to a close associate, as in 'this is my homeboy, Carl'. There are also undoubtedly English and Irish, working class and ruling class, antecedents but whatever the origins or elisions involved, it is the current semantic purchase, the 'affective nebula' (Maffesoli, 1996: 76) to which it is addressed, that interests me. I speculate whether the phrase 'my boys' operates at a number of discrete levels in relation to contemporary anxieties about masculine childhood and youth, and their collectivities, through the implicit allusion to masculine non-maturity.

Some of what may be involved and is of interest is revealed in the following interview excerpts:

I don't know, but my boys are always like number one sort of thing. Us boys we never choose a girl over the boys. And like, boys are all number one and they all come first and we don't like to let girls get in between sort of thing. If a girl comes into the gang they're accepted, you know, they're probably all right, fair enough, you know what I mean, sweet. But put it this way, we never meet up with a girl and just go leave the boys, you know. (R28; White, British National, Christian)

If someone comes on this wing now, one of my boys from road and obviously I've got quiet boys, obviously they are around bad boys and no one can do nothing to them and that. But they're quiet, they don't like fighting, and that. But if one of my boys like that came on the wing now, no one could say shit to them. (R23; White, British National, Christian)

No, he's my boy ain't it, my boy like, so ... the only way, the only way me and him would fall out is if he snaked [betrayed] me, if he snaked me like, but I don't think he would do that anyway. Like obviously someone could come to jail, I could go on road, I could go on road and he could go on road, he'd be with his boys, I'd be with my ones. (R50; Black, British National, Muslim)

Researching young men's sense of themselves as men, their feelings and feelings for others, can be difficult. As Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) note questions of power and control permeate the interview setting in ways that can seem threatening or just uncomfortable for men customarily disinclined to cede control or reflect on themselves with others (Pini, 2005). And these conditions are only exacerbated by the stresses of a custodial setting (Cowburn, 2007; Halsey, 2007). Asking young men to reflect on 'being a man' can be about as immediately productive as asking white people what it feels like to be white (Garner, 2007; Nayak, 2003) or English people what it means to be English because a functional, familiar, grammar is simply not available (Fox, 2005; Ware, 2009). It has never really had to be explained at an experiential level, much as, metaphorically speaking, a fish has no sense of wetness.

To get around these obstacles the semi-structured interviews focused on aspects of the young men's lives prior to custody, significant others and relationships, both within the prison and outside. What is considered here is an analysis of the recurrence of the term 'my boys' and the way it relates to the gendered patterns of sociality and masculinity in an earlier historical epoch. What was clear from the frequent occurrence of this term in the data is that particular networks of masculine association and friendship were central to many of the young men's social relations and identities, both inside the prison and outside.

Examining masculinity as an aspect of the social relations of gender in the early European medieval period Rose (1993) depicts patterns of masculine collectivity and 'modalities of being' that have striking correspondence with the accounts of the young men's lives I found in HMYOI Rochester, and to those presented by Gunter (2008), Hallsworth and Silverstone (2009) and Pitts (2008). According to Rose (1993), one way to be a man on the social margins in early medieval Europe was to be attached to a powerful other in small localized martial hierarchies, known as *mannerbund*. The *mannerbund* was the means by which otherwise dislocated young men entered a path towards the acquisition of some semblance of power, or simply protected themselves from hostile others. In doing this, young men developed direct, kin-like ties through hierarchical association with powerful/heroic men. They were propelled to do this, Rose argues, echoing Beier, by a specific historical conjunction that witnessed the declining capacity of village communities to provide security, and the impotence of yet to be fully formed urban and state collectivities to offer an alternative.

As Hallsworth and Silverstone (2009: 373) tellingly note, the life depicted 'on road' with 'my boys' recalls this pre-Enlightenment, Hobbesian, world 'where the social contract has [little] salience or purchase ... a state of nature, "a war of all against all"'. As feminist scholars, such as Pateman (1988) and Young (2003), argue this common rendition of the transitions to modernity is a profoundly but implicitly gendered one, reflecting specific gender preoccupations, experiences and masculine imaginaries, while seeming to speak for a universal human condition.

This is not to diminish the authenticity of the young men's experiences, or the implications Hall and Silverstone identify, but to stress they have a powerful and neglected gender component. The young men's accounts in Gunter (2008), Hallsworth and Silverstone (2009) and Pitts (2008) tell of the almost complete de-materialization of the State at the local and personal level as anything other than a hostile force, to be evaded or confronted. The State is not recognized as being involved in providing houses, roads,

hospitals and schools, or a living wage, only and exclusively ‘cops, courts and corrections’. Young men’s prison accounts tell vividly of their failure to evade them effectively, their continued investment in mythologies of ‘road’ as a masculine alternative to a sense of contract, and, sometimes, the exhaustion of its possibilities. The reconfiguration of the State and the social destabilization accompanying the advance of neo-liberalism may not be equivalent in scale to ‘the great transformation’ (Polanyi, 1957) towards modernity but there is a hint of precedence. In the precarious political economy of the early 21st century, for some marginalized young men (McDowell, 2003; Wacquant, 2009), just as for some young men in the early middle ages, the viable modalities of masculinity become those of fragmented, martial prowess, homo-social collectivity and the governance of immediate local territory (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008; Pitts, 2008). All too often it is a masculinity posed defiantly against similar others and the powers of an increasingly penal state (Wacquant, 2009). Further aspects of these are discussed below.

Postcode Pride – Locality, Locality, Locality

In HMYOI Rochester there is a woodworking workshop in which a few prisoners can make and paint an assortment of wooden articles for their own use or to take away when they leave. During the course of the fieldwork photographs of these artefacts were secured from prison sources. Among the many images one stands out for the way it graphically captures a theme of defiant territorial aggression that nonetheless retains a faintly puerile edge. Onto a wooden box an image of the cartoon character Donald Duck has been painted. The white duck retains the pale, nursery blue sailor’s hat and jacket, but his eyes are psychotically crossed and blood-shot, his duckbill snarls while his left wing/hand holds aloft a blazing pistol, and in his right, he clasps a DJ’s microphone ready to ‘spit’ some ‘lyrics’. In characteristic hip-hop graffiti style lettering the owner’s postcode and area, ‘Eastside’ ‘Roman Road’ ‘E3’² are stamped across the box.

Among the most striking features of the fieldwork in HMYOI Rochester was the manner in which the young men conveyed the importance of a sense of local belonging. A sense of identity anchored in knowledge and experience of their area was frequently and powerfully expressed. The interviews revealed accounts of how the localized spaces in which their lives had been lived before prison – the streets, shops, parks, schools, colleges and clubs – continued to frame their identities and social relations in prison. These zones operated at the level of particular estates, streets or neighbourhoods, and at town level, particularly the latter for prisoners from Kent and Essex (Earle and Phillips, 2009):

Because the Isle of Sheppey,³ we don’t get on with the Isle of Sheppey either, that’s like the next town sort of thing. And like you get a lot of Sheppey boys come down to Sittingbourne⁴ on the train. And we don’t get on with none of them. And sometimes we just used to sit at the train station waiting for some ... yeah, keep an eye out sort of thing, you know what I mean. Any of them stop off, then we kick their heads in, back to Sheppey. (R28; White, British National, Christian)

For the young men from London the postcode often provided convenient shorthand for their identification with a particular area. Although sometimes condensed to simple compass points, the postcode commonly allowed them to specify zones to which they felt they belonged:

Yeah it's all coded, yeah, like area code, ain't it really. But, like, people from one area kind of just stick with people from that area code. And like south people stick with people from the area code south. It's like SE18, they've got south, SE18, SE7 and stuff like that yeah. (R34; White, British National, Muslim)

Other prisoners' narratives referred to what Robins and Cohen (1978) claimed is integral to (masculine) working class cultures – participation in the symbolic process of 'owning' a material locality. For young men this is typically managed through 'gangs' or 'fighting crews' which are pitted against rivals who engage in ritualistic displays of aggression:

It's a deprived area, there's a lot of crime and a lot of, what can I say, gangs, actually, to find a word that, you know, that would suit it. It's just a lot of different, they're more like tribes, if you know what I mean, very territorial ... estates really. (R2; Black, Foreign National, Christian)

These spatialized identities had strong generational and gender dimensions and were of central significance in the young men's lives (Earle and Phillips, 2009). As Phillips (2008) also notes these attachments frequently seemed to usurp, or readily co-exist with, identities organized through 'race' or ethnicity. 'Area Beefs' (zonal conflicts) that accompanied such identification appeared to have a higher profile as a source of social antagonism within the prison than the racialized tensions that characterize American prisons (Wacquant, 2009). Sometimes these local antagonisms would be either sustained or 'squashed' on entry to prison, as the remarks of this young man indicate:

I went out because my next boy from Hackney, he come onto the wing and they were going to rush me, these boys were going to rush me when I was outside. They live near my sister's area like, he's from N1 and I'm from E8 so I wasn't meant to go there, but I was going to my sister's anniversary. So when I saw him he'd act like he didn't see me, and then when I saw my boy, my boy was like, 'oh come onto my wing'. And then he tried to ask me, slyly, 'I see you're from E8'. I'm like 'yeah'. And then he started telling me how they squashed the beef and all that, so I'm just talking to him normally. (R48; Black, British National, Christian)

According to some historians (see Lawrence, 2000) local identification with place and their resulting 'local identities' have powerful parochial roots (Snell, 2006) that precede the emergence of British imperial identities and notions of a higher order 'Britishness'. Rather than taking these local experiences as merely particularist vestiges, or equally, novel reactive configurations, it may be more helpful to address their historical continuities in the shifting relationships of power between men, and between the city, the country and the modern state (Williams, 1973). Doing so reveals the long-standing nature of some men's 'failure to belong', local xenophobia and the intersections of 'intrinsic localism' with class conflict and state formation.

Prison and the Pacification of Marginal Men

The stories told by the young men in HMYOI Rochester are those of lives lived largely on the economic, social and spatial margins, lives on and among the streets and council

estates of London, Sussex, Essex or Kent. The romantic image of being 'on road' sustains hope of vitality, of movement and of open prospects where other sources of collective hope and social mobility have been dashed or denied (Hage, 2003). Their accounts of life 'on road' give vivid personal shape to Giddens' (1990) metaphor of modernity as a runaway engine careering erratically along paths chosen or 'unseen' at ever increasing velocity. At the end of the road, all too literally and frequently for these young men, lies the revolving prison door, and the antithetical experience of prison, but the image of 'road' lingers powerfully on. Although the image of being 'on road' has some solitary, individualistic connotations it is also a collaborative project sustained by another vagrant image, 'my boys', the loose and shifting affinities between the young men that help them to 'carry on' inside the prison and out. These two motifs converge in the young men's orientation to the new local spaces and political architecture of neo-liberalism in a kind of paranoid, neighborhood nationalism (see Back, 1996, Hage, 2003).

The revival of localism as an ontological solution to anomie, alienation and identity loss associated with late modernity is widely recognized (Giddens, 1990, 1991), though its gendered dimensions in the lives of young men less so. As McDowell (2003: 90) notes identifying the consequences of modernity for different men 'in cities and localities where high youth unemployment or low-paid casualised work are the only options for working class youths' is a pressing empirical question. Although McDowell (2003: 90) cautions against a 'singular emphasis on gender' to account for 'the problem of men' because of a concomitant 'hiding' of class and ethnic inequality, the ideologies of adolescent masculinity (see McRobbie, 1982), particularly those reproducing that 'self-damnation' identified by Willis (1977), should not be neglected.

The accounts of violence, actual and dispositional, suggested in the young men's accounts of their lives in this and other studies (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008; Gunter, 2008; Hallsworth and Silverstone, 2009; Pitts, 2008) are suggestive of another revival; that of certain kinds of masculinity, and certain kinds of masculine collectivity, those perennial 'outlaws' and 'outcasts' of the modernist masculine imaginary (Young, 2003). For some young men of the social and economic margins this involves persistent low key aspirations for a home, a community, a locale, a place to return to and thoroughly inhabit (Lefebvre, 1968), and is accomplished with varying degrees of success and multicultural conviviality (see, respectively, McDowell, 2003; Gilroy, 2004). For some others the open-ended vistas of 'life on road', the loose companionship of 'my boys' and the display of 'postcode pride' lead time and time again to one place: prison. For these young men the penal state assumes priority in managing and pacifying their unruly claims to place, visibility and value (Wacquant, 2009).

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Notes

1. In July 2007, after the research was completed Cookham Wood was re-roled as a YOI for 15–17-year-old young men to accommodate the expanding custodial population.
2. London area postcodes (equivalent to zip codes in the USA) are composed of letters indicating compass points, S for South, SE for South-East and so on, followed by numbers further delineating the zone referred to, such as SE12.
3. Isle of Sheppey is a small island of the Thames estuary, east of London in the county of Kent.
4. Sittingbourne is a small town in north Kent.

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Biography

Rod Earle is a lecturer at the Dept Health and Social Care of the Open University. He has worked for Lambeth Social Services, the LSE, the University of Surrey and Goldsmiths College.