

Prison Radio versus Panopticism

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I do not have my own keys. As a volunteer I'm part guest, part worker and, from the point of view of the guards, something of a nuisance. The idea that someone would work in a prison for free is such an unusual concept for them that when Officer Hunt finds out later his only response is to slowly call me a "fucking stupid cunt", in tones somewhere between admiration and disbelief. So for my three months working at Wandsworth Prison I am a constant hitchhiker dependant on the good grace of the initiated to lead me through. I am, if anything, glad not to be invested with this responsibility and symbol of authority.

The radio station is located at the end of D-Wing. To get there – to get to anywhere in the prison – one must pass through the central chamber, the huge, hexagonal room that dominates the prison. Six wings housing 1,400 prisoners radiate outwards from this hub like the spokes of a wheel. From the simple wooden desk in the centre one officer can view any prisoner who leaves their cell. It is a potent symbol of authority and control.

The radio station, far from that watchful eye, has a feeling of freedom, of energy. The guys in the radio unit are invariably already working when I get there (they start at about 8:30am) – peering intently at sound waves on computers, or heads buried in scripts and written work.

The radio project has two main parts: a training unit that teaches prisoners a BTEC in radio production, and a broadcasting unit staffed by prisoners who have completed the course. 'Radio Wanno' informs the prison population about the services that are available to them: training and educational courses, advice and support, and interviews with prisoners and staff about everything from drug addiction, to religion, to maintaining contact with families.

The emphasis on informative programming reflects the ethos and approach of Radio for Development (RFD), the NGO that set up the radio project two years ago. RFD began operating in Africa, using radio as a cheap and effective way of reaching isolated communities with public service and educational information. However, as RFD's Director James Greenshield explains, there are many such isolated communities in the UK too – elderly people for example. Prisoners, with lower literacy rates than the overall population and poor access to written information, were another obvious choice.

Today there is a heightened feeling of stress in the unit. In about an hour the BTEC students begin their final examination in the form of a half-hour live show. It's the culmination of four months of intensive work, learning how to record, interview, edit and present radio. The subject for discussion, "Does prison really work?" is hardly unusual in itself. Until you remind yourself that the guests, the presenters, and pretty much the entire audience are prisoners themselves.

The presenters, Warren and Trevor, introduce three guests: Anderson Charles, Wayne Morrell, and Charlie Ugunasu. All, apart from Warren, are black – West Indian, African, and British voices mingling. The general prison population, like the guests on the radio show, are disproportionately from ethnic minority groups.¹

"I don't see the Government being interested in making it work for prisoners themselves," says Wayne Morrell, the most outspoken of the guests, the most combative. "It's just a way to get people off the street."

"If the prison system focused on why people were committing offences in the first place, then

maybe people could be rehabilitated. Why did I do those robberies? Because I needed the money. If I was able to go out there, and get a job and earn the money that I need to support my kind of lifestyle, there would have been no reason for me to do that. You know what I'm saying?"

Soft-spoken Charlie Ugunasu disagrees: "This is my first time in prison. Being here made me think more about what I was doing out there. When I come out I might be willing to be a different person to what I was before I got arrested."

But Anderson Charles doesn't think he'll get a job either: "Given all the resources and facilities inside the prison – even though someone here have the chance to make amends and turn around their life – when they go back out into the street and into society, not everyone want to accept them because they have been to prison."

The debate comes to a close, with few firm conclusions. Perhaps before we can ask whether prison is working, we should ask ourselves, "What is prison actually *for*?" Is it to punish? Is it to reduce crime? Is it to rehabilitate?

Seventy percent of prisoners are reconvicted within two years of their release. Relational statistics tell us having a job reduces the likelihood of re-offending by between a half and a third.² But the stigma of imprisonment prevents many prisoners from becoming employed, despite educational and training opportunities in prison.³ Only a quarter of prisoners find paid work after release.⁴

Yes, social and economic disadvantages play a major part. Two thirds of prisoners are unemployed at the time of their conviction, and the majority have no qualifications.⁵ A third are homeless. Many prisoners come from troubled homes – half ran away from home as children, and more than a quarter were taken into care. Add to that a high incidence of mental health problems, drug addiction and alcohol abuse.⁶ It is no coincidence that ethnic minority groups, the poor, those with mental illnesses, and the addicted are so over-represented in the prison system.

The reality is that modern prisons were never conceived to 'solve' these *social* problems – they were conceived to isolate them, to control and to punish. Rehabilitation and reintegration are the result of slow and painful reforms that have seen the institutions modified, but never really transformed. Prisons have a strong history, one which has been resistant to transformation. Nowhere is that legacy clearer than in the architecture of Wandsworth, in the central chamber, the panopticon.

The Historical Developments of the Panopticon

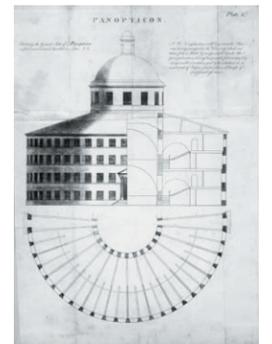
Few of our institutions are as unquestioned as prisons in the public sphere. Granted, there is a continual, low level debate about prison reform, about hard and soft approaches to dealing with crime, about sentencing – all fuelled by the latest tabloid tale of early release. But prison's role as the essential recourse to "dealing with people who break the rules" is rarely, if ever, challenged. One gets the impression that they have always existed. But prison as we know it is a distinctively modern institution, its development intimately linked to the rise of the state and industrialisation, and to the ideologies that went along with these developments, most notably the protestant work ethic and enlightenment rationalism.

Until the end of the medieval period prisons

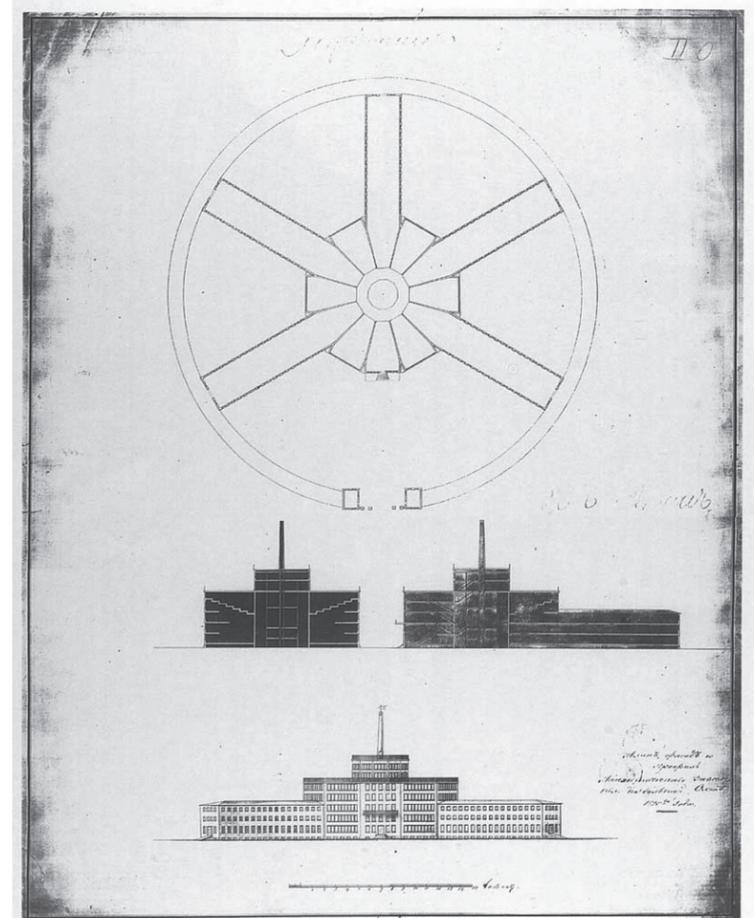
were small, local institutions, designed to hold prisoners awaiting sentence or until debts were paid – not long-term holding facilities. The deprivation of liberty for some specified period of time was not the punishment *per se*. European monasteries provided inspiration for an alternative model. There, punishment for religious infractions was penance: the private expiation of guilt until repentance is achieved. This evolved into "confinement in a monastery for a set period of time"⁷, often accompanied with solitary confinement and strict silence.

But the development of mass incarceration came with urbanisation and the great land enclosures of the 15th and 16th Centuries. The rural poor fled the harsh conditions in the countryside and flooded into the cities; "the dispossessed now became the mass of the unemployed – beggars, vagrants, and in some cases, bandits."⁸ Early prison institutions were set up in response. Their inmates were an undifferentiated mix of old and young, men and women, petty criminals and prostitutes, and those merely unable to work. The lines between poverty and criminality were so blurred that these groups became labelled as "criminal types" – a legacy we still live with today.

The concern of the ruling classes was both to employ and discipline this unruly mass. The workhouse was their solution. The first model, the Amsterdam 'rasp huis', saw prisoners reducing logs to sawdust by hand in order to produce dye.⁹ The work was gruelling and monotonous, reducing the individual to an obedient machine. The fearsome reputation of these institutions served to discipline the working classes into accepting employment on any terms. However, with increasing use of machines during the 18th and 19th Centuries, they became loss-making propositions. At the same time, enlightenment reformers such as Jeremy Bentham



In Bentham's design the prisoner is constantly exposed to scrutiny. Wandsworth, however, was a modified version that allowed prisoners some privacy in their cells – more like the design below.



Photography by Miguel Ciriza

were seeking new and more humane ways to control “errant” social groups. So was born the panopticon:

“‘PANOPTICON’ or, the inspection-house containing the idea of a new principle of construction applicable to any sort of establishment, in which persons of any description are to be kept under inspection; and in particular to the penitentiary houses, prisons, houses of industry, work-houses, poor-houses, manufactories, mad houses, lazarettos, hospitals and schools.”

Jeremy Bentham, 1791, In a series of letters from Crecheff in White Russia.

Bentham’s vision was a huge circular building with an observation tower in the centre. The cells, forming the outer wall, each contained an isolated inmate. A window in each cell made a silhouette of the prisoner, or other subject – their every action observable from the tower. By contrast, shutters prevented the prisoner from ever seeing the watching guards. Never knowing if one was observed or not, the prisoner assumed they were watched at all times, and behaved accordingly. The ever watching god of monastic imprisonment was replaced by the authority of the state, the warden, the factory manager, the doctor, the adult. The recalcitrant individual – whether child, worker, poor, insane or criminal – was deemed to be incapable of ruling themselves. They therefore had to be ruled. They had to be watched.

Bentham’s architectural vision may have dispensed with the whip and the treadmill, but it also dispensed with prisoners’ humanity. By isolating them, it cut them off from their peers, their families, even the guards. It was thus intended to prevent the “cross-contamination of criminal, insane, or rebellious tendencies”. The only relationship that remained was between the prisoner and the state. For Michel Foucault, the French philosopher renowned for his studies of social institutions, this architectonic ideal represented a turning point in social control – the point at which it became a highly refined science. It allowed the one to view the many – it allowed effortless control. It was a laboratory where ‘deviants’ could be observed in detail and ultimately changed, altered, formed or *reformed*.¹⁰

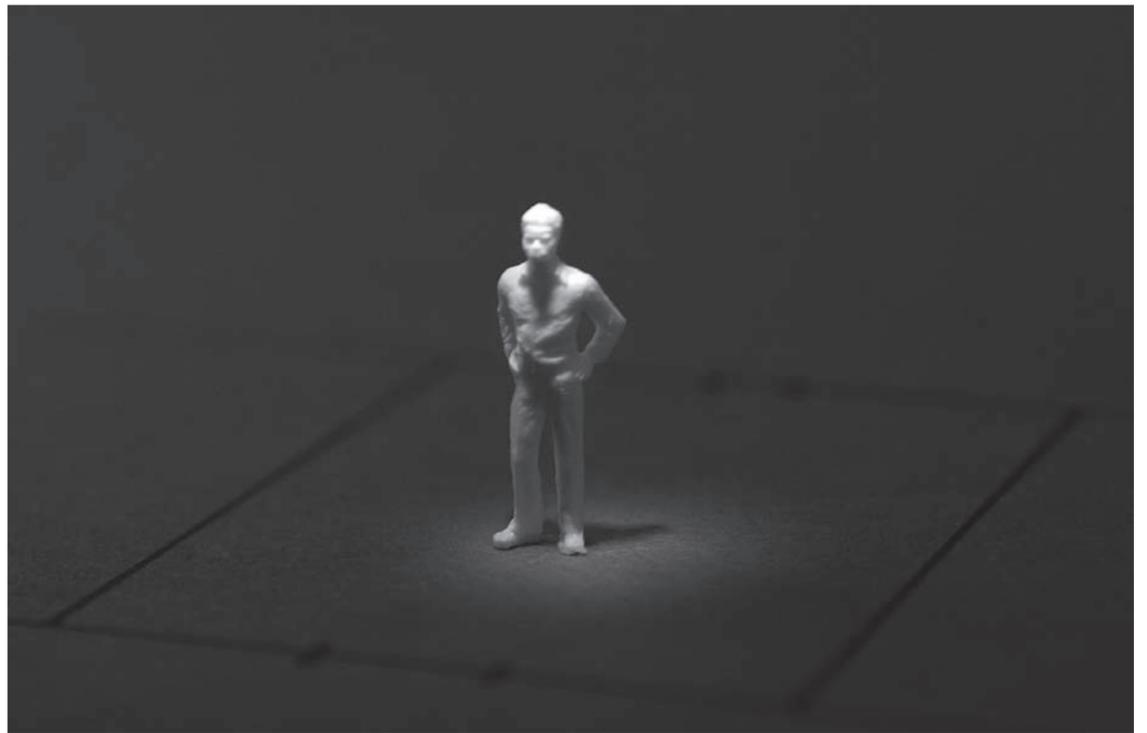
The 20th Century saw much reform of the view of the prisoner; notably the popularity of the idea that the prisoner was “psychologically sick”. A functional divide saw the wardens responsible for guaranteeing security, whilst an army of specialists – psychiatrists, criminologists, social workers – treated the prisoner.¹¹ The techniques became more sophisticated, more humane, but the prisoner was still regarded, in the final analysis, as an institutionalised deviant.

Inverting the Panopticon

Is the radio project just another experiment in remoulding this deviant individual? The buzz words of the project sometimes reflect the more traditional concern of prison and state to retrain and reform the prisoner – improving literacy and communication skills, and learning to work to deadlines are meant to ready them for the discipline of the market and employment.

“When I come to the radio station I don’t really feel like I’m in prison”, Richey Euphori, a member of the broadcasting unit tells me. His powerful build contrasts with his manner – quiet, affable, and constantly smiling. “You can create things... the time runs so quick. It doesn’t give you time to think about negative things, so you’re always thinking positive all the time, about creating something, doing something with your life.”

Yes, the project is about changing people, but through opportunity, not compulsion. They are given access to technology, to high quality teaching, and the creative freedom to explore ideas and issues that matter to them. Whilst I was there I heard programmes about poverty and economics in Africa made by George and Immanuel (from Nigeria and Ghana respectively) and about reggae and raga music by Trevor (from the West Indies). Ben explored the subject of forgiveness, and Mike crafted an atmospheric



programme about the history of the death penalty in Wandsworth.

For me the project’s greatest achievement is that it inverts the philosophy of the panopticon. Prisoners, those constant objects of scrutiny, of examination, are instead empowered to look about them, to look at their world and their place in it. They are given both the personal and technical skills to project their point of view to people. Only a few of them may make it in the competitive media sector, but impact of just one eloquent individual upon the homogenous mainstream media could be striking. A handful of ex-prisoners are well on their way – several are studying broadcast media at Goldsmiths College, and one, Mark Williams, won a national award for his audio diary about leaving prison.

“When you’re in the crime spree zone, the money is so easy”, Warren tells me. He’s one of the youngest on the course, and one of the most ambitious. He’s applying to study journalism and film, and has already lined up some work experience with a TV production company. “Let’s say I’d have done a bricklaying course” he says. “I know for a fact that I’d have done bricklaying for a couple of years and then gone back to crime.” The money, he tells me, wasn’t for survival, but for status – for the clothes, the lifestyle and the image it could buy. Now he talks about wanting to leave something tangible behind, to influence people – for example, he’d like to make a documentary about the graffiti gangs he used to be in. In exchanging a can for a camera, he is, I feel, showing the same interests, the same desire for self-expression and recognition.

The idea of empowering prisoners and giving them opportunities is controversial. Part of the fundamental purpose of prison, after all, is incapacitation – partly to protect the public from potential harm, and partly to punish. But this blanket approach can be harmful, not only to the prisoner but also to society, suggests ex-prison governor Stephen Pryor. While it removes the potential for the prisoner to be irresponsible it also removes the potential for him to be responsible. They are trained to be good prisoners – obedient, cowed and institutionalised – but not to be able to make responsible decisions after release. Responsibilities are taken away from them – family, work, the maintenance of a home – sometimes with good reason, but usually without thought.¹²

Indeed, Pryor argues, the idea that they might be responsible is largely discounted from the moment sentence is passed: “It is the adversarial process of proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt that makes the court seem to condemn the whole person. The offender may be a highly responsible person in other respects.” But the presumption is that they are *criminal characters*, rather than people who have committed a limited criminal act.¹³ The actual experience of prison – the isolation from society, the severing of family ties, and the damage to any prospect of legitimate employment – risks making this categorisation binding and permanent. It’s important for

prisoners to hold on to outside roles. Michael McDermott, one of the most conscientious of the radio students, stays in touch with his family by writing and phoning regularly. Visits are harder. “I told one of my daughters on the phone the other day that I’ve got my key skills in literacy,” he says. “I told her about this university course, and on the phone she goes, ‘Dad, I’m really proud of you.’ She’s only 13. Those words are so strong.” He goes on, saying: “It takes them two hours to come and go, and they only see us for about 45 minutes. By the time I’ve gone back to my wing and lain down, they haven’t even left the building. It must be really stressful for them, especially for my daughters – at first they were always crying.” Michael feels frustrated at not being able to keep an eye on his teenage daughters – anxious about them getting boy friends, and choosing jobs over studying.

Though the prison regime is inherently disruptive to the parental process projects like ‘Family Man’, based next door to the radio project, help to mitigate the separation. As well as offering support and advice about parenting fathers can record bed time stories for their children to listen to. It’s another way in which human relationships are being recognised as the solution, rather than isolation.

The relationships between prisoners and prison officers, problematic as that may be, is equally important. Unsurprisingly, the relationship is open to abuse – prisoners, having transgressed the law, do not enjoy *de facto* the same legal protections as other citizens. But both Pryor and Murton argue that many humane officers enter the service for altruistic reasons and that they should be encouraged not to exercise all their power over prisoners – in other words, not to view control as the goal. Instead, they should give increased responsibility to prisoners – in work opportunities in the prison, as elected prison representatives, and even in managing their sentences.

However, the idea that prisoners should have some responsibility and with it rights does not currently enjoy popularity. For example, the Government has so far resisted a European Court of Human Rights ruling last year that the UK ban on prisoners voting was a breach of their human rights.¹⁴ Working forms of participative approaches can be found as early as the 19th Century, such as when Captain Alexander Machonochie, the father of the modern parole system, became the superintendent of Norfolk Island penal colony off the coast of Australia in 1840. Machonochie rejected the violent and brutal regime he found on the island, replacing guards armed with cutlasses and pistols with selected prisoners armed with staves. Prisoners were organised into groups of six, responsible for each other’s conduct and ultimate release. They participated in court hearings and disciplinary matters. They were allowed plots of land to grow food to sell to the free islanders, and were allowed to keep their earnings. Once they had earned 12,000 marks they were paroled to the mainland. Here we see the very antithesis of the panoptic model of control. We see them

encouraged into supportive mutual relationships with each other, rather than isolated. We see them given control over their own productive powers, rather than being exploited as free labour. In his four years as superintendent, only three percent of released prisoners were reconvicted, while there was only one killing and three escapes.¹⁵

Many of the prisoners who will leave Wandsworth will find themselves with neither savings, work, nor accommodation. When I first met the irrepressibly positive Richey Euphoric he was due for release. He had successfully completed the radio course, as well as a physical education course to tackle drug addiction. He was, as he put it, “fit for the road.” But months later he was still in prison, because he couldn’t demonstrate that he had somewhere to live. He had lost his house while in prison, and applications to organisations like the St. Giles Trust for emergency accommodation were rejected. “Their policy does not allow them to re-house anyone who has done a sentence of more than 12 months,” he says. “Which leaves people doing more than a year out. And I was under the assumption that when you’re doing more than a year, obviously you lose touch with the street. So to come out and not have a home to go to, it can be very difficult.”

Richey remains optimistic. He has applied to study building service engineering and will have the support of a PROP mentor: a volunteer on the outside who will give him careers advice and help for six months. “The most effort must come from me – where there’s a will there’s a way. But sometimes in life you face closed doors, where you try on your own and the doors are shut. That little extra help, where they can pull strings, that will help.” But this level of support is unusual. The mentor is provided through the prison radio project, not the normal prison resettlement department. Why? Cost might be a factor, but it is more likely that this reflects the general level of antipathy towards prisoners in the UK. In Sweden, for example, where prisoners are still regarded as citizens, volunteers are used extensively in the probation service.¹⁶

There remains much debate about how to reform prisons. Murton and Pryor, both ex-governors, argue that privatised prisons can be more humane and participative, because they are free to innovate, to break away from the authoritarian tradition of the state. Yet moves towards competitive private involvement in the UK prison systems have already led to concern about cost cutting, lack of accountability, and the ethics of profiting from prisoners.¹⁷ In the US, large-scale private involvement in prison construction and management shows alarming results, with companies like Wackenhut lobbying state legislatures for more prisoners. They want filled cells, not reformed and released prisoners.

Innovation and change are important, but we don’t have to look to private companies for it. The penetration of small NGOs and civil society groups

into prisons, such as Radio for Development, can bring a different ethos and approach to rehabilitation, one that understands the social and economic background to crime.

The different approaches outlined – the radio project, prisoner participation, voting rights, and employment opportunities – all seek to strengthen the positive bonds that connect prisoners to society. Whilst the panopticon isolates the prisoner, severing all relationships except that with the state, these initiatives seek to build human relationships between prisoners, families, and prison officers.

Within the prison there remains a tension between a history of authoritarian control and dehumanisation, and a modernity that sometimes demands, with moral and legal force, that prisoners’ human rights be protected. The reality of what prisons are and do lies somewhere between these influences. They satisfy the ancient public hunger for visible retribution; they guarantee the dominant social order and the state by disciplining disaffected social groups; but they have also partially adopted a modern mission to remake and reintegrate their charges into law abiding citizens. I sometimes suspect that these efforts are doomed, and that they constitute, primarily, a sophisticated method of legitimating the basic original remit of the institution – however unpalatable to a modern democratic society. It’s a schizophrenic position: we are unwilling to fully accept ex-prisoners back into society, but also unwilling to reject them completely. Thus we offer them training, but not homes or jobs.

Prisons do not cause crime and are therefore in no position to bring about solutions. Crime is a *social* problem, a part of our society, not a separate aspect of it. But the terms of the debate still indicate that people are, as Foucault suggests, being separated into binary opposites; normal and abnormal, safe and dangerous, legal and illegal. This is a two-fold deception: it creates the illusion that “we” are free from tendencies to be sexual, violent or avaricious, while at the same time creating the corresponding illusion that all those in prison possess these tendencies exclusively. It comfortingly denies our own imperfections, depositing the dark side of human behaviour in the few.

Nowhere is the dichotomy clearer in the public domain than in the media. Sexual deviance and crime are both condemned, while the public’s vicarious appetite for them sated at the same time. Fantasies of theft and violence are glorified through film, while simultaneously denounced. Murder brings celebrity status, fascination and horror.

The radio station and the words and thoughts of the prisoners remain confined behind the walls of Wandsworth prison, the signal absorbed by the stone.¹⁸ Would the public be willing to listen to those views? Would it silence them in anger,

or ignore them? The radio station offers the possibility of a discourse between those different people, a conversation that would reveal prisoners in all their complexity, in their individuality, rather than the mere isolated silhouettes of the panopticon.

Notes

- 1 At the end of June 2005 a quarter of the prison population, 19,366 prisoners, were from ethnic minority groups – compared to one in eleven of the general population. 35% of these were foreign nationals. *Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefing* – 2005. p.23
- 2 F Simon and C Corbet, ‘An evaluation of prison work and training’, (1996) Home Office Research cited in *Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefing* – 2005. p.34
- 3 Of course, we should not pretend that everyone is in prison for economic reasons. Sexual and violent offences account for a third of the prison population. But at least another third of all prisoner offences are in some way economic – theft, robbery, burglary, fraud – and over half if we include drug offences, many of which will be dealing or smuggling. *Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefing* – 2006.
- 4 Niven S and Stewart D, (2005) *Resettlement outcomes on release from prison, Home Office Findings* 248. – cited in *Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefing* – 2006.
- 5 ‘Through the Prison Gates’, Home Office 2001 – cited in *Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefing* – 2006.
- 6 Various sources – see *Prison Reform Trust, Bromley Briefing* – 2006, p.19
- 7 Melossi & Pavarini, ‘The Prison and the Factory’, (1981) p. 4
- 8 Melossi & Pavarini, ‘The Prison and the Factory’, (1981) p.12
- 9 *Ibid*, p.21
- 10 Michel Foucault, ‘Discipline and Punish – The Birth of the Prison’, (1977)
- 11 ‘Prison: Present and Possible’, Edited by Marvin E. Wolfgang, (1979) p.10
- 12 Stephen Pryor, ‘The Responsible Prisoner’, (2001) p.1
- 13 *Ibid*
- 14 James Erwin, ‘A Vote for Human Rights’ – *The Guardian*, 06/02/2006. Note that the ban dates from the 1870 Forfeiture Act – yet another indication that the prison institution remains heavily influenced by 19th Century ideas.
- 15 Thomas Murton in ‘Prison: Present and Possible’, edited by Marvin E. Wolfgang, (1979) p.27.
- 16 Gilbert Geis, Epilogue, ‘Prison: Present and Possible’, Edited by Marvin E. Wolfgang, (1979).
- 17 The recent *Prison Reform Trust* report ‘Private Punishment: Who Profits?’ “acknowledges that private sector innovation has, in some cases, improved regimes but it raises questions about efficiency savings and the need for private companies to achieve economies of scale”, and it also goes on to point out the private sector’s many “failings to meet targets on serious assaults, drugs and purposeful activity [for prisoners]” and to question the “ethics of large companies profiting from the incarceration of thousands of people.”
- 28 It is not impossible for material to be broadcast outside the station – I am currently making a show with some of the members of the Broadcasting Unit that will be broadcast on the US show *Making Contact*. But, as you might expect, all material must be checked by the prison administration and the Home Office prior to broadcast.