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Radical hope, rituals and (dis)order - exploring prisoners' experiences of release from prison in England & Wales and Norway

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Punishment and imprisonment in the Nordic countries: Comparative perspectives

‘...how many films have you seen starting with some guy leaving prison and walking out of the gate’ (Phil, EE3, E&W)?



'Flat' and unemotional release narratives

'I've been coming in so long. I don't get butterflies, or excited at the prospect of getting out, it's just become monotonous, to be honest with you' (Kirk, EE2, E&W).

- 1) Release does not necessarily mean that punishment ends
- 2) There are no formal 'redemption' rituals in place upon release in either jurisdiction
- 3) Expecting joy upon release presumes that life is better outside of prison



Rituals and what they do

‘It seems that if a person has no place in the social system and is therefore a marginal being, all precaution against danger must come from others. He cannot help his abnormal situation. This is roughly how we ourselves regard marginal people in a secular, not a ritual context. [...] A man who has spent any time ‘inside’ is put permanently ‘outside’ the ordinary social system. With no rite of aggregation which can definitively assign him to a new position, he remains in the margins, with other people who are similarly credited with unreliability, unteachability, and all the wrong social attitudes’ (Douglas 1966: 121).

It’s like being permanently stuck in limbo because what you find is you’re heading towards your release and you’re trying to get your head in the right space and go, “Right...” (Joel, EE3, E&W)



Radical hope

- “When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened” (Lear 1996: 2).
- Hoping for something which is still invisible, unrealistic or intangible.
- Radical hope is a useful concept to think with because it ‘might function as a necessary constituent in times of radical change’ (Lear 1996:123), such as release from prison.



Methodology

This sub-study is divided into three phases:

- Entry
- Exit
- Post-release

○ We are interested in the experiences of:

- Mainstream male prisoners
 - Female prisoners
 - Sex offenders
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- We are particularly interested in what it feels like to enter, leave and step outside the prison gates and what the transformation process from citizen to prisoner to citizen is like
 - We have interviewed over 280 prisoners in 11 'core prisons' in the two countries – some of them two to three times at different stages



Three questions

- Does it make sense to understand release narratives as stories of 'radical hope' and what kinds of 'ground projects' do people allude to when they are about to leave prison?
- What are the functions of rituals and what happens when they are missing?
- How can we understand and problematize our own and others' findings in light of 'order' and 'disorder'?



‘[...] I want to walk to the shops, I want to you know walk the dog, I want to go the field with my son with a football or a bat and ball or something, I want to do these things, I’ve got to do these... [...] I just want to be a family person; I just want to do the house and make dinner and do family things’ (Sandra, EE3, E&W).



‘I only hope that my life will be normal, *like everyone else’s*. To have my own house, and a job and my own family for the rest of my life. *I’m not hoping for more than that*’ (Benedicte, EE2, Norway).

‘To get my own place, get married and get my children living back with me, yeah’ (Holly, EE2, E&W).



Shapland and Bottoms (2011): 'You have told me what kind of person you see yourself as, what kind of person would you like to become'?

- Going straight/being drug and alcohol free (40%)
- Living a normal/regular life (32%)
- Be successful (27%)
- Be a good person/be responsible (25%)
- Be a family man (21%).



Ground projects

‘Ground projects refer to the kinds of commitments that people find so deep to who they are that they might not care to go on with their lives without them, or would not know themselves if they no longer had them. They include deeply cherished and self-defining ideals, activities, and personal associations’ (Mattingly 2014: 12).

And your new life, what’s new about the new life?

‘My new life is going to be very family-oriented. I’m going to work hard, I’m going to save. I’ve got a five-year license, so I’m going to save as much as I can to give myself the best start once I’m off license [...]’ (Carlos, EE2, E&W).



‘So at no point was I thinking “oh hey I am free”. So yeah a lot of people have asked me that: “oh you must have felt amazing when you came you, you know, you were exhilarated or whatever”. Not really, *I was just on the other side of a wall. If the wall hadn’t been there, or the fence hadn’t been there, or the metal gate hadn’t been there that is where I would have been.* It just... I don’t know it just... It was weird’ (Glenn, EE3, E&W).

We’d already been told that’s where he’s coming out and when it opened, I’ve got to be honest, it was the funniest thing. He doesn’t realise but we were watching and he actually did, he went... It took him three takes to physically make that first step.

It was so weird. Just again, it feels wrong. It feels like you’re suddenly stepping into an area that you’re not allowed to be, that somebody’s going to come running back and go, “What are you doing? Right, you’re back in here, you’re going to be down in the seg.”

That’s exactly what he said, his first words were, “I shouldn’t be doing this, I’m not supposed to be here, I’m not allowed to be here.” That was the first words he said.



See you later

‘I think [other prison] cared more about people when they got released than what this prison does (Holly, EE2, E&W).

So what happened at the gate, not that they usually... Did they go with you? Did they ask you if you were alright? Was there any sort of caring at all?

‘It was basically sign here, sign there and off you go. [...] Oh god you know... It wasn’t easy getting out’ (Glenn, EE3, E&W).

Did anything special happen on you last day in prison? Did you speak with any of the officers at all?

‘No. I was just in my room and then I just left – “see you later”’ (Oscar, EE3, Norway).



‘When I came out of the gate they stood there with small Norwegian flags, blasting ‘Olsenbanden’ in the car [Laughter]. And my mother-in-law had knitted three ribbons in the form of Norwegian flags, so they stood there wearing two of them and fastened one on me when I came out of the gate. So several of my fellow prisoners sat outside in the smoking area and were dying of laughter. And they blasted the music so they heard it all the way inside [Laughter]. It was very fun, a good feeling’ (Torben, EE3, Norway).



And can you describe how it felt to actually leave the prison itself?

[...] They just open the door and that's it. I had to find out where [eldest son] was, I had to wander around carrying my bag and my rucksack' (Emmitt, EE3, E&W).



Can you tell me in a bit of detail what it was like, the build-up to release?

‘Yes, pretty much the same. They don’t really prepare you or get you ready for anything. You go down to resettlement and you have to fill out paperwork. You sign your discharge papers. That’s it basically. In the morning time they call you, like 7 or 8 o’clock, you get released at 11, you get your valuables, your money, and that’s it. They give you a travel warranty if you ask for one’ (Bella, EE3, E&W).



Were you given any help or preparation the last days before your release?

‘No. Nothing. There wasn’t anything at all. I had to ask when I was leaving [...] and then as I was leaving, my brother came to get me, fortunately, I went to the reception with my TV and bags and pictures that I’d painted in there - so it looked as if I was moving. And there was no one there - because it was a Saturday - at the reception, [...] I had to wait because they had to do some tests or something. So I had to stand there for a good half an hour waiting before I got to the gate where my brother was standing at the parking lot, waiting. That was a little... bitter, it was hard [...] (Sverre, EE3, Norway).



‘In the third stage, symbolic acts of incorporation focus on welcoming the person into a new status (in effect, birth of the new self): there is the conferral of a new name and symbolic insignia, usually some form of communal meal, and so on’ (Bell, 1997: 36).

‘So I know he loves American food so we’d always decided we were going to go to an American diner, and I’d already phoned and asked [name] his probation officer, because we didn’t know when he was going to come out. All we got told was 8.30 to 11 but he had a 2 o’clock appointment. So I’d already said to [name], “Look, if he comes out at 11, can we go for something to eat first?” And she said, “Not a problem, just phone and tell me ‘(Joel, EE3, E&W).



Shaming re-entry ritual

‘That same day that I was released, after going to probation, my next job I wanted to go to the police and just get that out of the way, which I was dreading, but the local police station in [town] is closed, so [town] is the closest one. So we went up there and I was disturbing his sandwich when we walked in. I guess they’re not very busy on the inquiries desk because now it’s all on the phone. **I told him that I was just released from jail and was registering and he was like “registering as what?” and I was like “I am a sex offender, I need to register under the act” and he kind of looked at me puzzled, almost as if either he couldn’t be bothered or... [...]** It was almost like they don’t care. It wasn’t electronic. It was all paper-based. **So either that gets sent off, or it just sits in a pile and I’m sure it gets processed somehow. You hope. For all the effort that everyone goes through’** (Allen, EE3, E&W).



‘The one thing I will say though is if I don’t come back to prison, it’s not because they’ve [prison staff] done their job, I’m not coming back because I don’t want to come back, because I’ve changed as a person, I no longer want to commit crime. But it’s not because of them, they might think that oh, we’ve sent Mr B away for 13 years and now he’s changed because we made him change. You haven’t made me change or made me think different, it’s the fact that I’ve been away from my daughter...and I can’t do that to her. But they ain’t done nothing for me. And if I didn’t have my daughter maybe I’d still be in the same mindset as I was right at the very start...that’s it (Abdul, EE2, E&W).



He works at a building site and he loves it. His bosses held a meeting with all staff and told them that the interviewee was being released, that he had served his sentence, and 'done his time' and they wanted the colleagues to accept that and not ask any questions whatsoever unless the interviewee initiated a conversation about prison (Field notes, phase 3 interview, JL).



According to Douglas (1966: 120), 'the novices on initiation are temporarily outcast during the marginal period which separates ritual dying and ritual rebirth'.

'I remember feeling really excited but also really scared because I was going out to chaos. I lost all my incomes, lost the place I was living, relationships, people, you know I lost a lot of stuff so I wasn't exactly feeling too excited to get released.' (Nate, EE3 E&W)



And how did you feel when you were leaving the prison?

Scared, lonely, lost. I don't know how to describe it. Just alone. No support. Daunting, it was daunting. Hence why I think I've ended up back here. It's structure.

Structure?

In my life it's structure, it's a routine, a set routine, three meals a day, I know what I'm doing. Out there my life is so chaotic because of drugs and drink and committing crime. It's not good.

Would you say you're happy in here?

I wouldn't say I'm happier, but sometimes I feel a bit more content in myself (Freya, EE2, E&W).



‘It’s like right, there you go, out the door, and you’re stuck in the middle of nowhere...in an area that I don’t know, *like good luck, and then make your way to the train station and see you later*, but... [...] And it’s all good if you’ve got somewhere to live and you’ve got loved ones picking you up, great, but *there’s so many of us that haven’t got that*...but you know...and really...*I mean the life that I’ve explained to you out there if you’ve got nowhere to live, I feel like I’m better off in here*. [...] at least in here I’ve got my friends, I know where I’m sleeping, I’m safe, I’m settled, and it’s really sad to think that like I’d be happier in prison than I would be outside, you know, but *that just goes to show how bad life outside is when you’d be better off in prison*’ (Holly, EE2, E&W).

