

# A Cell of One's Own?

—Wayne Knights

*A review of Can Prisons Work? The Prisoner as Object and Subject in Modern Corrections. Stephen Duguid, University of Toronto Press, 2000. Duguid's book won the Harold Adams Innes Prize for best English-language book in the social sciences 2000-2001.*

Can prisons work? What kind of question is this? Two centuries have passed since Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon project promoted the idea that prison regimes could actually correct offenders. Is it some new perversity to propose it in the year 2000? At least since the world wars this kind of optimism has been dissolved in cynicism, ideology-critique, anxiety, the celebration of difference, and, above all, realism. Hasn't it been clear for some time that the practical enlightenment was a misguided attempt to impose progress through conformity to rational norms? Isn't it apparent that there is little normatively rational about social action and that intentions and outcomes are at odds with each other by nature? Well, isn't it?

Apparently Duguid (pronounced Do Good) prefers the 18th century, an amusing, childlike time. This is why we have tenure, to protect the innocent from the self-evident. So Duguid can persist, suggesting that prisons can work by exporting this ivory tower into the prison. Just as the ivory tower implies a beautiful distancing from the influence of everyday social and political pressures, so this ivory bunker can resist the influence of the authoritarian, coercive environment of the prison. And both tower and bunker, because of their (relative) autonomy from their surroundings, can create the pre-conditions for change—change of self, community, and ethical life.

A review must fairly summarize this argument, so let me try. In the interests of self-flagellation, I should point out that Duguid, I, and several others worked in the ivory bunker as non-commissioned officers and comrades for some time. More incriminating yet, when our sentences finally expired and the ivory bunker was overwhelmed, I worked on the research project that provided much of the empirical evidence for Duguid's arguments. There are no innocents.

## **The Green Mile**

To be fair, some people think prisons work by deterring people from committing crimes, at least when they aren't run like holiday camps. In some instances, mostly sentimental, they might see some Christ-scenario working itself out amidst the occasional injustices that inevitably arise in prison. (And if you think the mouse in the movie was unrealistic, well, I can tell you prisoners and animals are always saving each other.) Modern imprisonment was rarely intended as simple punishment for bad deeds or as an opportunity for the meek (and the mice) to inherit the earth. One of the great virtues of Duguid's book is the short, critical history of correctional philosophies in Canada and elsewhere, which is an essential context for understanding what is at stake. Nor is this a dry academic account; it has the feel of being told by someone who lived (and occasionally suffered) through much of it.

No citizen would have reason to know this, so here is a potted version of some recent salient moments highlighted by Duguid. At some point in the postwar period, and consistent with the psychologizing of social life (see Tony Soprano in analysis), we saw the emergence of a medical model. In this version, the prisoner, the deviant, is sick. Fortunately, the sick can be cured by the application of a proper science of normality. Moral, environmental, physical and intellectual deficits would be addressed through programming. One fondly remembers prisoners, asked to picture home, drawing nice middle-class suburban images in gestalt groups—as long as they were stoned. In 1974, an infamous overview of 200 such programs concluded “nothing works”. No sooner had the Emperor been declared to lack proper attire, the whole façade collapsed. A funding crisis helpfully underpinned this change of heart, but there was a genuine insight as well: the process of incarceration undermined any rehabilitation efforts it supported.

The next period, which tried to fly under the banner of the “opportunities model,” was a period in which Duguid, paraphrasing Mao, says “a hundred flowers bloomed.” This might suggest a rosy picture, of creative experimentation and happily competing ideas. More accurately, a vacuum had been created. Prisoners had to do

something in jail, particularly as sentences were getting longer (this is known as “dynamic security”). It was not as if corrections encouraged opportunities and a new tolerance; it merely made room for opportunists while the correctional professionals retreated, licking their wounds. Prisons were invaded by new institutions (universities, school boards, private contractors), new issues (black power, native rights, even inmate rights), and new faces. As Duguid says, the latter came “with minimal baggage in terms of the patterns that had been established by prisoners, treatment staff and corrections staff.”

And so the university went to prison, sometimes under the guise of educational treatment, but staffed by individuals who rarely shared the imperatives of the prison, who fancied themselves university instructors, and who saw their new students as, well, students. Some of them had even read Foucault, identified with Meursault’s rebellion, dabbled in critical theory, and yearned to smash the state—if only theoretically. The reader will enjoy Duguid’s rich account of this period, redolent of every political and cultural strain from the collapse of the dollar to the collapse of the Wall. It is in this period that the university program in BC’s federal prisons established itself and flourished. The decline of the medical model and the vacuum it left dovetailed nicely with ideas about programming and education that came to embody a contradictory relationship with the prison system.

After all, this was prison. The fences were not going to come down. So once again the great question at the heart of the university’s relationship to society was acutely posed: can society/prison tolerate the ivory tower/bunker; that is, can the context allow the university the independence of thought and inquiry that defines it? Now this is a very complex question, and Duguid’s book can be read as a commentary on this troubled issue in the largest sense—the focus on prison just sharpens the debate. The university program, like the university, ran

**So once again the great question at the heart of the university’s relationship to society was acutely posed: can society/prison tolerate the ivory tower/bunker; that is, can the context allow the university the independence of thought and inquiry that defines it?**

into all kinds of obstacles, including inmate/student culture opposition, conventional values, issues of security and conflicting philosophies. (There have been prison wardens, I might add, who have understood this relationship better than some university presidents.)

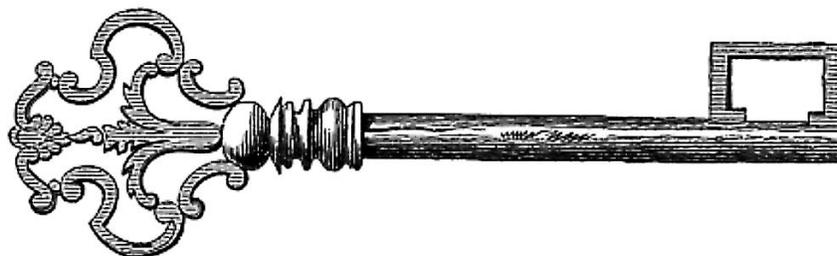
Part of Duguid’s argument is that the ethos of the university was fundamental to the distance required between the program and the prison that might make a prison work—that is, work to turn the criminal into the citizen. This citizen is conceived not as the conforming soul beloved of the medical model, but as the participating, possibly oppositional, hopefully democratic and mostly

tolerant subject of the modern world. The prison, this enthusiastic paragon of the bureaucratic and authoritarian institutions spawned by the Enlightenment, is expected to tolerate a “counter public-sphere” in its midst, a space or interstice, where experimental transformative change can take place. In effect, we need prisons to embrace a potentially explosive relationship with the programs inside it. This won’t happen any time soon, but in that period between 1974 and 1990 sufficient space did occasionally appear that could be exploited. The implications

are the heart of the book, but first we need to know the rest of the history—which will not disappoint those who hold to the “first time tragedy second time farce” view of things.

The vacuum couldn’t last; nature rushed to fill it. As befitting the whole paradoxical exercise, theoreticians of the university program’s activities, especially Duguid, found elements of their work

re-surfacing in an unrecognizable form, the medical model redux. (There are some humorous moments between the lines, brought about by the curse of self-reflection.) With Maoist metaphors floating around, it will come as no surprise that a model of theory and practice lay at the heart of the university program. The university program in BC was somewhat unique in its desire to theorize about the practice of education and the formation of academic communities in unseemly spots. This had resonance; maybe there was something rational about observed changes. Maybe it could be generalized! Embodied in institutional practices, that sort of thing. Worse,



there was empirical evaluation suggesting these theories were practical and could lower recidivism. Nothing fails like success in a prison setting. Professional correctors began to perk up. Maybe something could be done, and much better than by amateurs!

This is simplification. But as Duguid argues, making the university work in prison involves a keen awareness of the essentially paradoxical nature of the activity, in that difficult to define space in which determinism and freedom play. Piagetian or Kohlbergian theories of educational and moral development might be employed heuristically (you are going up a hill in the fog; you want to be sure every step is an upward step, *pace Sartre*), but imagine your surprise if these theories become codified steps to the top. What was suggestive was now rational. It could be reproduced, duplicated, engineered, appropriated.

Suddenly, it seemed, the complex relationship of theory and practice became the power of positive cognitive thinking. To ensure the security-conscious prison got on board, policy makers, wedded to the new dogma of cognitive development in a correctional setting, wisely tied career success to ideological agreement. Everyone was on board and the train was going to Dodge City. In the shoot-out at the OK Corral, the university program wasn't okay—too independent, too distanced, too, well, stand-offish. Besides, who needed university employees when your own correctional staff could be cognitive enablers.

This is the end of the real green mile, at least for now. Walking the green mile (and the hallways are still institutional green, and so are the prisoner's clothes) is to walk the last mile to execution. You start off, things look desperate, you get a handle on the situation, save a few mice, perhaps the warden's ass, and finally the process re-asserts itself. You discover you are indeed a dead man walking, walking on floors you cleaned every day. This is the story

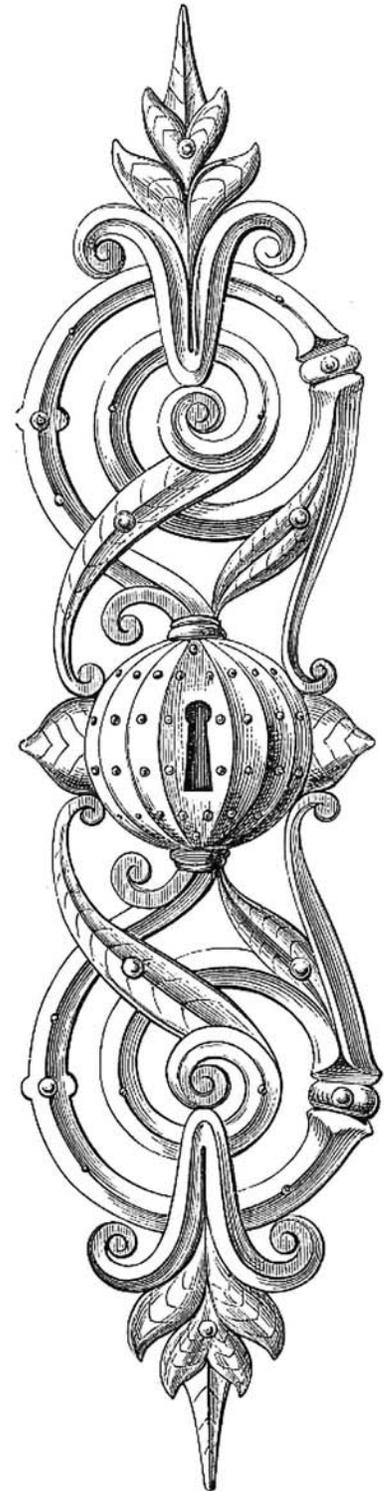
Duguid tells, although he might not recognize it in this form. The inevitable demise is no surprise, nor, ultimately, is the part your own hand plays in it. But how you walked that mile is more important than the end. So what about his analysis of the counter public sphere at the heart of darkness?

#### ***The subject-object of this history***

The mythical figure of the Subject-Object identical is a temptress, and Duguid ignores the sirens' call. The uniqueness of this book resides in a deep regard of the moments when the play of subject and object, freedom and determinism enter into a kind of concrete dialogue that makes occasional sense of the apparent contradictions between them. At the sharp end, prison education is the experience of paradox and contradiction. It doesn't move on, it isn't surpassed or overcome, it doesn't issue in a new reality. And yet it does move. The prison is a determinate entity, as is the past of the prisoner and the subculture that informs it. Duguid describes how the prisoner tries to resist the identifications, roles and labels imposed on him by the prison, while all the while embracing those of "the life." He makes history, but not always as he pleases. In that gap is the play, the space in which change might be negotiated.

To illustrate this, Duguid borrows Virginia Woolf's metaphor in *A Room of One's Own*. She insists a "woman must have money and a room of one's own if she is to write fiction." Transposing, if the fiction is an authentic self in relation to the whole, and if money can mean resources and the social connections embodied by them, and if the room is the space in which the private self can determine its interactions with the public sphere, then we can begin to picture how this might look.

In assessing the more successful experiments of this period, Duguid isolates three factors essential to the transformation from criminal to citizen: "a democratic ethics, a diverse set of political linkages, and an inevitably complex set of needs and



relations.” What does this mean? He elaborates (I paraphrase slightly):

First, an ethical stance towards the prisoner, with him or her as a subject rather than an object (a file, a label, a type). Structurally, this means a democratic and participatory environment. Second, there need to be bonds with the conventional world; for example, bonds with an outside institution like the university, its students, its staff, and its resources. Finally, a structural approach that relies on the complexity of the situation, acknowledging that prisoner needs are many and unique and the intervenor’s skills and abilities are various and limited.

The last point needs a bit of elaboration. Basically, at the heart of Duguid’s book is an appreciation of the irreducible individuality of the prisoners, and staff, and anyone else. This is implied in the sub-title— from object to subject.

Once we see the prisoner as a subject, all the generalizations and labels one might apply are compromised. Evaluative studies and theory require generalization, but you can’t educate on the basis of these generalizations. Thus the university program had a loose admission policy, and resisted all attempts to stream candidates for the program or limit it to deserving or appropriate inmates. Thus one of its nominal incarnations: the Humanities Program (much preferred to the bureaucratically necessary Prison Education Program).

This discussion is necessarily abstract, which is unfortunate, because at the centre of the argument is a sophisticated empirical evaluation of

the impact of the university program, an evaluation based on a research methodology that captures the complexity of the situation described above. Without this, the book would be passing theoretical wind. Most evaluations of prison settings force complex social experience into a set of boxes marked successful/not

possibility of realistic action. And if that depresses you, then I would urge readers to look beyond the title of this work. Yes, it is about prison. But it is about much more than that. It is about education, about democratic citizenship, about the value of enlightenment and the practical value of the humanities in informing social action.

**Personally, I’ve been fond of an epigram of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They suggest the prisoner in his isolated cell is the very image of bourgeois individualism that modern society wishes to impose on the subject. I always feared that the university program participated in this imposition, that in a truly cunning way it turned the criminal into a nebulous social being—not egocentric enough to be a criminal, and not autonomous enough to be a citizen.**

Personally, I’ve been fond of an epigram of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They suggest the prisoner in his isolated cell is the very image of bourgeois individualism that modern society wishes to impose on the subject. I always feared that the university program participated in this imposition, that in a truly cunning way it turned the criminal into a nebulous social being—not egocentric

successful, good/bad, effective/ ineffective. Nothing can ever work, because the method and the practice are at odds with each other. Not surprisingly, this is paralleled by the contradictory relationship between the enlightenment style object (institutions) and the potentially enlightened subjects trying to live within them so typical of the experience Duguid analyses.

enough to be a criminal, and not autonomous enough to be a citizen. Duguid’s notion of what we might call a “cell of one’s own” points a way out of that conundrum by promoting an image of freedom and communication over the current reality of isolation and one-sided conversations.

Can this book change things? Not in the present atmosphere. In a literature marked by enthusiastic proponents of corrections and cynical critics of any activity in prison, there is little room for a radical analysis of the

