

## PREFACE

My interest in prisons began when a colleague invited me to join a small group of mental health professionals on a visit to a nearby state prison. Two moments during that carefully arranged event have remained with me over the ensuing years. One was a discussion with several officers who worked in a maximum security psychiatric unit. They were blunt about how poorly, in their view, psychiatric care fit into custodial containment. Behind the immediate content of what they said, I had a sense of pent-up narrative energy: these prison workers clearly had more to tell than the format of our visit could contain. The second moment was when our tour took us to the outer gate of the prison's "supermaximum" or "control" unit. Our little knot of academics stood awkwardly in front of the double gates, able to see nothing more than an empty hallway and the edge of a heavy steel door. We had little idea what lay beyond, and we were clearly to be allowed no further.

This book is the result of my engagement as an anthropologist with the maximum security prisons I was so briefly introduced to that day. The visit was an early step in the Correctional Mental Health Collaboration, an association between the University of Washington and the Washington State Department of Corrections that began in 1993 and ended in 2002. This relationship between my university and the prison system made it possible for me to enter prisons and to carry out the ethnographic work

on which this account is based. I was familiar with how public psychiatry is practiced, and knew that many thousands of people who once would have been hospitalized are now incarcerated. Realizing that I was seeing an extension and replacement of the state hospital I had studied earlier, I wondered how psychiatrically impaired inmates and the standard diagnostic system were assimilated into the prison context. What powered the intensity so evident in the way the officers we met described the mental health setting in which they worked? At the time of that first visit, however, I knew almost nothing of the existence of control prisons. When I did eventually enter these facilities, which are designed specifically to isolate prisoners from one another, it became clear that prison “mental health” exists in a dynamic relationship to the management of those prisoners designated “the worst of the worst” and assigned to super maximum security housing. I began to explore the links and tensions between madness (psychiatric and otherwise) and reason (the presumed rationality of people and systems) as they are contained and expressed in conditions of total confinement.

This is a work of ethnography spread across several maximum security facilities. I draw on the whole period of university involvement with the corrections department, but especially on three years of intensive research that occurred after I had become somewhat familiar with how control and psychiatric units are related within a larger institutional system. Sometimes I indicate my membership in a close-knit team of generous colleagues with whom I visited prisons, organized interview sessions, and met with officials. More often, this account reflects my own ethnographic work, carried out while visiting prisons on my own. I interviewed maximum security inmates formally in visiting booths and talked with them informally at cellfront. I talked with uniformed staff, mental health staff, administrators, and officials, and attended numerous prison events and meetings. The collaborative project that most contributed to this book was our three-year study of the state’s control units, for which we interviewed almost ninety randomly chosen maximum security prisoners as well as forty staff members at three facilities.

Much of the material in this book is in the form of conversations, some with me, and others in which people speak primarily with one another. These conversations form layers of commentary on the experience of being imprisoned and how that experience is interpreted, on the conflictual

and difficult nature of prison work, and on the fraught relationship between punishing and caring for those excluded from ordinary social life. When the custody officers in the psychiatric unit complained about conflicts with the mental health staff, they were not just grouching about difficult work. They were describing unresolved questions about control, rehabilitation, and individual choice that bear—often painfully—on the practices that sustain confinement. As I got to know prison staff and prisoners, it became increasingly clear that what is the stuff of classroom debate elsewhere was the content of their everyday lives. During the past twenty-five years of prison proliferation, the historical prison has become a potent academic metaphor for power, domination, and the problematics of governmental order. Prisoners and prison workers who struggle over the interpretation of behavior engage long-standing and deeply rooted dilemmas about what it means to be a human—and a social—being.

The intensive prison expansion of the last quarter of the twentieth century produced an institutional complex of almost unimaginable size and complexity. Although prison growth has recently slowed, the prison complex remains a massive—if partially hidden—presence that matters to our public life in a myriad of both obvious and subtle ways. Large-scale incarceration has its most obvious effects on those directly involved as prisoners, workers, and their families and communities. Perhaps less clear are the ways in which the growth of imprisonment as an almost reflexive response to social problems affects our priorities for public life and is reflected in a pervasive media imagery of violence in the service of the law.

This book appears at a moment when debate on prisons seems to be shifting, with increased questioning of the effects of sentencing laws, prison construction, and other aspects of the boom in incarceration. Such questioning has begun to take into account the increasing imprisonment of the mentally ill and the contradictory expectations that result. While the effort to meld psychiatry into custodial containment is extremely difficult at the local level, it is—relatively speaking—fairly transparent to critical analysis. It is not yet clear, however, to what extent control units—the specialized maximum security facilities I describe here—will be subject to the same level of debate that is overtaking prison building in general. These facilities are less accessible to public scrutiny, and apply a sophisticated technology to processes of social ejection with deep historical roots and broad implications for the national psyche. Although these expensive pris-

ons are profound in their effects on inmates and workers and useless for other purposes, they have the momentum of a compelling and exclusionary cultural logic. My aim is to allow the conundrums that unfold daily within prison walls to enter into a larger conversation about these institutional practices and the ways they immerse us in certain confounding aspects of our national life.