

# Book Review: Prisons, Punishment and the Pursuit of Security

by Blog Admin

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*Nation states around the globe are struggling with increasing concerns over human and global insecurity. Within this climate crime and criminal justice policies in many countries have become key areas of political focus, with the prison poised to play an important role in security strategies. This book problematises the persistent use of prisons and punishment and their role in pursuing higher levels of human security. Drawing on extensive, qualitative research in men's long-term, maximum-security prisons in England, questions are raised about the means by which security is pursued. **Johannes Wheeldon** finds an important contribution to critical criminology and prison ethnography.*

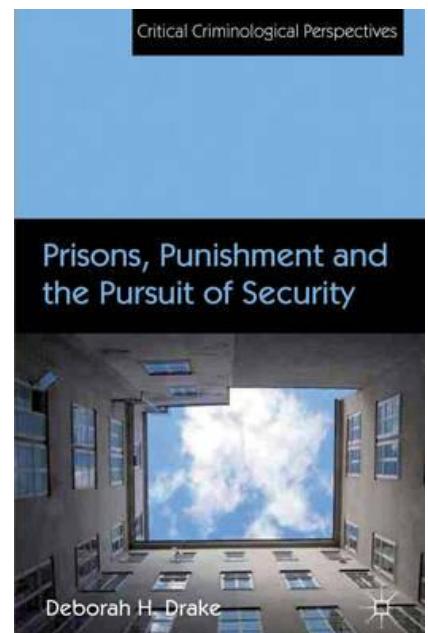


**Prisons, Punishment and the Pursuit of Security. Deborah Drake.**  
**Palgrave Macmillan. July 2012.**

## Find this book:

In a Cabinet reshuffle in August of 2012, Prime Minister David Cameron removed Ken Clarke as Justice Secretary. Clarke had proposed to reform penal policy by strengthening community sentencing and reducing prison numbers. Cameron abandoned those plans replacing Clarke with Chris Grayling, a notoriously conservative Minister who publicly promised to make the prison environment in the UK *harsher*. In *Prisons, Punishment and the Pursuit of Security*, [Deborah Drake](#) provides one way to understand why this view remains so persistent, despite the lack of any evidence that severe approaches to crime control make society safer.

Based on more than 300 interviews and interactions in five men's maximum-security prisons in England between 2005 and 2009, Drake suggests the purpose of prison is essentially political – designed to showcase severe sanctions as a means provide the public with a false sense of security. Drake approves of Nils Christie's [call](#) that those who work close to penal systems should work to puncture myths, problematize simplistic assumptions, and expose the ideologies that underpin our expectations about human security (p. 11-12). In this book, Drake argues that prisons tend to obscure underlying social problems, justify repressive practices, and rely upon simplistic assumptions about the role of punishment.



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The tendency of prisons to obscure social problems has been chronicled in the US by [Bruce Western](#) who argues prison instils anti-social behaviour, undermines labour market skill sets, and devastates families. Drake provides first hand accounts of the ways in which the purported function of the prison contrasts with everyday practices, and Chapter 5 brings readers inside the prison walls. Of specific interest was Drake's description of men who return from psychological 'treatment' broken, in tears, or so angered that they go back to their solitary cells and 'just implode' (p. 100). There are important observations here about how the reliance upon cognitive-based programming fails to consider how that programming is delivered. Drake provides an up close view of the damage that can be done when treatment is used as part of a punishment agenda and not as part of a participatory plan (p. 101-103).

Drake also provides some context for the global role of prison and punishment as a means of social

control (p. 26-31). Perversely, the failure of punishment has led not to a fundamental rethinking of this approach, but instead for calls to make the response harsher and more severe. Prison has become an accepted and/or preferred response to crime, a view based on neo-liberal assumptions about markets, incentives, and law and order politics (p. 49-53). Drake observes, with some despair, that the prison industrial complex is growing on 5 continents. Of some interest is how she describes repressive penal practices, what she calls the 'invisibility of coercion' (p. 113-117) and the routine application of security measures has the effect of de-humanizing those who are incarcerated. For many, victim and prisoner rights are a zero sum game. As a result the routine informal day-to-day penalties inflicted on those serving their formal, legally sanctioned punishment become a 'second tier of punishment' (p. 85). When crime policy is dictated by emotion, it is the anger, fear, and frustrations of crime victims that take precedence. This may contaminate the ways in which staff and inmates relate to one another.

The emotional character of penal policy is also relevant in understanding public misperceptions about the role of prisons and punishment. While the description of some who commit crime as 'evil' may appear simplistic, Drake shows how this form of 'othering' persists despite the recognition that many of us are capable of committing horrible acts. Prison, it seems, permits in some way our delusional denial of our own malevolent and potentially harmful behaviour. Drake reports meeting no monsters among the men she interviewed. Instead, she describes individuals with complex mental health issues, socialized in ways that prized violence. Others simply made unthinking and ultimately deadly mistakes (p. 139-141). Evil, then, may be in the eye of the beholder and thus used for political purposes, as a means of exclusion, or subject to the prevailing ideology of the day. In the place of the historic need to balance care and control, and social welfare with denunciation and deterrence, Drake argues populism is driving the punishment agenda based on deeply held moral views and political expedient social divisions (p. 68-72; p. 143-148).

Like other recent efforts, Drake's methodology (p. 178-194) is buried in the notes in the back of the book. This is a shame, in my opinion. The methods employed and assumptions upon which they are based deserve equal attention alongside the findings Drake so usefully weaves together. This is especially important in an era of calculator criminology, in which data driven conclusions are prioritized over the voices and narratives of the incarcerated. Unfortunately, Palgrave Macmillan has seen fit to charge 50 British pounds or 80 US dollars for the book. It should not go unremarked that this is a sum that is unattainable for most of those whom Drake interviewed. While this effort is more accessible than many other critical texts, it is ironic that while clear critical scholars have never been more necessary, their contributions are sequestered behind ever-increasing pay walls. Is this the price of publishing with respected presses?

Drake concludes by calling for an end to policies that result in greater human suffering for more understanding and deeper consideration of the social, economic, and structural inequalities within our societies. Her call ought not be ignored but a let down after the fearless examination which preceded it. While Drake notes the co-optation of Restorative Justice (RJ) programs by the formal justice system, she might have spent a little more time considering how [RJ practices](#) might be better employed among the armies of educators and program staff within prisons. There is convincing research which suggests vocational and post secondary education are the best means to reduce recidivism, promote accountability, and prepare individuals for their eventual release. It would be useful for critical scholars to consider how to create more of these sorts of opportunities. While describing harm is essential, it is always easier than considering how to reduce the damage inflicted on those caught up in the madness of mass incarceration. Of course no work is perfect. As Drake notes there are no simple solutions for the multi-faceted challenges her work has uncovered and this is an important contribution to critical criminology, prison ethnography, and the senselessness associated with pursuing security without care. I am sending my copy to Mr. Grayling.

*Note: This article gives the views of the reviewer, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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**Johannes Wheeldon** holds degrees from Dalhousie University, the University of Durham, and Simon Fraser University. He worked at the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada between 2002-2005 and has since worked for the American Bar Association, George Mason University, and the Center for Justice, Law, and Development. He is currently a Post Doctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at Washington State University and teaches Philosophy to inmates at the Coyote Ridge Correctional Center, the largest prison in the Pacific Northwest. His work in the prison has been recently been funded by the Open Society Institute. [Read more reviews by Johannes](#).

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