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## Sykes's problem of order in and out of context: returning to the source in *The Society of Captives*.<sup>1</sup>

Richard Sparks, University of Edinburgh

### *Reading Sykes then and now*

Like quite a few people who have studied prisons, perhaps especially those who have done extended fieldwork there, my relationship with Sykes's *Society of Captives* is both long and personal. I first read that book in the late 1980s (interestingly, to me at least, almost exactly half way between its publication in 1958 and its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2018) when I was in the midst of my first extended experience of doing prison research. Although Sykes has rather little to say about fieldwork or method I nevertheless found many things, but perhaps especially the dispassionate yet curious and humane tone of his writing, helpful in navigating my way through that experience; and I have considered the book to be good company ever since.

It was, however, afterwards as my colleagues and I read, reflected and debated what we had observed and sought to develop our ideas about it, that Sykes's book became most important to us. That importance lay, at least in part, in arguing with Sykes and discovering problems in his position. It was to me quite important to know, for instance, that within a few years of the appearance of *The Society of Captives*, Sykes found an antagonist of equal stature in Thomas Mathiesen, whose book *The Defences of the Weak* (1965) found a quite distinct set of power relations in the Norwegian therapeutic prison that he studied soon afterwards. Sykes became in my eyes 'good to think with' the more we tussled with him, identified some of the limitations of his position, supplemented him by reference to subsequent theory and in all these ways *located* his contribution. Most of the

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<sup>1</sup> Final author's pre-publication version, now published in Ben Crewe, Andrew Goldsmith and Mark Halsey (eds) *Power and Pain in the Modern Prison: The Society of Captives Revisited*, Oxford University Press (2022, pp 54-70)

working-out of that engagement is to be found in chapter 2 of our book *Prisons and the Problem of Order* (Sparks, Bottoms and Hay, 1996), and I revisit some of its claims and conclusions below.

It never occurred to us then, still less now, to think that Sykes had said the last word on theorizing the problems of power or order in prisons. He did however say some of the first and most lastingly important. When we began to read him in earnest – in Britain in the late 1980s, in the context of our own project and its concerns with the stressed and volatile character of the questions of order and control in long-term prisons in England and Wales at that time – it already felt like a rediscovery. There were a limited number of important texts about these questions in the United States in the 1970s and 80s, but they had almost no British counterparts in the years immediately prior to our study<sup>2</sup>. In retrospect, it feels like we were part of a modest ‘new wave’, one whose successors have ensured that the field would not be left so apparently fallow again.

These recollections prompt a number of conjectures and questions. From the vantage point of the present, a couple of years on from the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations for *The Society of Captives*, Sykes’s reputation and the longevity of his book seem secure. It is an acknowledged classic, a ubiquitous reference in an active field of study. Yet this has not always been so. As recently as the early 2000s both Jonathan Simon and Loïc Wacquant argued that the empirical study of prisons in the United States had fallen into abeyance, and that prevailing ideological conditions made it extremely difficult to embark on new work (Simon, 2000; Wacquant, 2002). Indeed, Simon’s article

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<sup>2</sup> The key exceptions were probably Cohen and Taylor’s (1972) *Psychological Survival* and King and Elliott’s (1978) *Albany: Birth of Prison, End of an Era*. Yet these books were already more than fifteen and about ten years old respectively when we began our fieldwork. Roy King’s influential collaboration with Kathleen McDermott coincided exactly with our own work (King and McDermott, 1990; 1995); and Elaine Genders and Elaine Player had done the first of several joint projects (Genders and Player, 1989) shortly beforehand.

explicitly called attention to the decline of empirical prison studies in the United States at that time in the context of the *fortieth* anniversary of *The Society of Captives*.

So, I first encountered Sykes when *The Society of Captives* was roughly thirty years old, roughly thirty years ago. Simon used it as a reference point for marking a change of eras in both the scope and operations of penal power and their openness to research around its fortieth birthday. Is there any real benefit in returning to it again now, just because it has turned sixty?

A book that lasts a long time, and is read in many different places, may slip in and out of focus. It may be read for different purposes and to different effects by new sets of readers with new priorities and needs. On the other hand, one possible fate of 'classic' texts over such extended periods is that they become unduly familiar – already-known, widely summarized and anthologized, reduced to gobbets and bites. It might then become harder to read Sykes illuminatingly or with any sense of surprise of the kind that I experienced in the 1980s. It might also as a result become harder to reconstruct important things about what was ever really urgent or original about the book. What concerns animated it all those years ago? What was Sykes really doing when he started *that* research project and wrote *that* book about it?

In this essay I therefore begin by briefly considering what it means to read such a text – a piece of social research like *The Society of Captives* that has both conceptual and empirical dimensions – 'in context', to use an abused term. A few scholars, notably Western (2007), have remarked upon the salience for Sykes of the political environment in which he initiated this project. I think it is worth pressing this point somewhat further in order to sketch Sykes's underlying *problematique* – the implicit questions to which *The Society of Captives* was in some way an answer.

This prompts some reflection about the role of ‘classics’ within fields of research. One such role is to provide links across time and place, suggesting that there are abiding problems and preoccupations that give the field in question some continuity and coherence. One risk that results, as we have already begun to suggest, is that we read such texts (if indeed we *read* them at all, rather than just receiving them at second hand) reductively, as already-familiar things, and therefore without any sense of surprise. If we want a book such as *The Society of Captives* to avoid such a fate, then we either have to move on and forget about it (as Baudrillard (1983) polemically suggested we do for Foucault), or we have to find ways of reading it more productively. That might, paradoxically perhaps, mean re-reading it *out* of context, here meaning with a conscious eye on the uses to which it could be put somewhere other than its time and place of origin. In so saying, it becomes apparent that we were already doing this when we tried to put Sykes to use in British prisons in the 1980s and 90s, though we did not greatly problematize that translation at the time. Conversely, there are new readings of *The Society of Captives* emerging now (especially from Latin America, especially in light of its recent translation into Spanish – see Sozzo, 2017 and this volume) that very consciously ask what it means to relocate his work to a markedly different time and place, one decidedly distinct from its original setting<sup>3</sup>. So, in short, the aim of this paper is to see what emerges if we make the effort to re-read Sykes first *in* and then *out* of ‘context’.

This could all feel a bit recondite. I want to suggest otherwise, of course. The aim is instead to refresh our readings of Sykes in order to avoid reducing his contribution to a mere package of already-familiar tokens – the five ‘pains of imprisonment’ universally applied, universally slightly

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<sup>3</sup> A similarly interesting (if brief) re-reading is suggested by Clare Anderson, an historian of colonialism, who wonders in what ways Sykes’s discussion may inform analysis of transportation and penal colonies, including the definite limits of any such translation. See: <https://staffblogs.le.ac.uk/carchipelago/2016/11/11/the-pains-of-imprisonment-an-historical-sociology-of-penal-transportation/>

amended, for example. His project, I will argue, is a lot more ambitious and less obvious than that, and best grasped by returning to it with a more strenuous appreciation of the context – the surrounding conditions of debate, in and against which he wrote – that provoked Sykes to undertake a study of a prison in the first place. As I will indicate, this means re-reading Sykes a little bit differently than we (including I) have done previously, and somewhat against the grain of the expectations that we (including I) have come to accept as standard. That work, I suggest, is a helpful preparation for thinking about the changed requirements on thinking about prisons now rather than then and in places other than the United States. These do not, I am sure, demand that we ‘forget’ Sykes. Rather they sharpen our sense of what we may recover from him, what ‘Sykes’ has been taken to signify at different points along the way, and what he cannot provide and which we must seek elsewhere. This, I argue, is what is entailed in trying to read Sykes charitably<sup>4</sup>, accurately and alertly *now*.

#### *The Society of Captives as a ‘classic’*

It is more or less *de rigueur* to refer to the classic status of *The Society of Captives* in prison studies. We may be aware that people wrote books about or involving prisons before Sykes, some of them immensely important for literary (Dostoevsky, Dickens) or political (Howard, de Tocqueville) reasons, amongst others. But for those of us who study prisons – and for many who have worked in prison systems – this is a sort of ‘scriptural beginning’, as Stanley Cohen has it in a slightly different context (Cohen, 1988). Sykes creates a kind of template – the extended study of a single institution, brought together in one richly textured volume (exceptionally concisely so in his case) – that many have emulated or adapted ever since. Some commentary has been completely explicit on this point: there

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<sup>4</sup> I have in mind here something like what the philosophers call a ‘principle of charity’, understood as a methodological caution towards maximizing scope for agreement, and avoiding misattribution of motives and reasons. See in particular Davidson (1991).

have been many books written about prisons since the 1950s but Sykes remains ‘the champion’ (Reisig, 2001).

Here, for reasons of brevity, I largely take this classic status as a given. I have also, writing with Tony Bottoms and Will Hay, to some extent addressed this question before (Sparks et al., 1996: 38 *passim*). The view of his contribution that we came to, writing in the 1990s after a long period ‘in the field’ ourselves, was (in condensed form) the following. Sykes, we argued, pithily states that the prison is to be understood as a ‘system of action’ (1958: 79). It poses a special kind of predicament, both for those who live in it and for those who seek to govern it. He thereby dispenses with the idea that this is because there is something pathological about either party. They are just people, struggling with a certain set of challenges, and with each other. Prisoners face certain inherent deprivations – the famous ‘pains of imprisonment’ – and these constrain the choices available to them in terms of how they adapt to life in captivity. The staff, meanwhile, are compelled to reproduce the institution from day to day, avoiding crises and catastrophic breakdowns wherever possible, with limited resources of effective power and in the absence of any ‘internalized obligation to obey’ (Sykes, 1958: 48).

Everyone is to a greater or lesser extent stuck. For prisoners, outright resistance, though sometimes provoked, is rarely the best strategy in the long-term. For staff, though seemingly gifted with overweening power, actually exercising it to its maximum extent, is rarely feasible or wise. The real system of action of the prison, therefore, is not what it at first appears, though people may be inclined to pretend otherwise. The social order of the prison is to large extent a negotiated one, though under special conditions of no-one’s particular choosing. Those involved often achieve, sometimes for extended periods, some form of *modus vivendi*. At such times, the naked use of force

is relatively rare and the everyday life of the prison is quite far from the warlike state of public imagining (see further Sparks et al., 1996: 48).

*The Society of Captives*, we suggested, thus addresses questions that are close to the core of much social and political thought, and of concern to everyone – power and conflict, continuity and change, coercion and compromise. It views the prison as an instance of a problem of order, properly so-called. That problem is one shared by all institutions of domination, even if the forms it takes are particular to prisons in certain respects. Sykes thus approaches a persistent practical and conceptual problem in a concise and elegant way. He recognizes the intractable difficulties that confront all the parties.

This no doubt goes a long way towards explaining how *The Society of Captives* acquired its classic status. Amongst the functions that Stinchcombe (1982) claimed for classic texts in social science disciplines are those of being in some way exemplary, and of helping successive generations of readers to clarify their sense of the fundamental problems and questions of the field (see further Davis and Zald, 2009). These functions seem to be of greater importance in some fields of study than others. The history of engineering, say, seems to be an activity primarily for historians rather than for practising engineers, but the history of sociology is a live question for the practitioners of a field that stands closer to unresolved intellectual and political contentions, and who thus still feel a need to organize their arguments and orientations.

Sykes's closing 'Postscript for Reformers' in *The Society of Captives* offers little by way of consolation for those who might hope that the internal contradictions of the prison's 'system of action' could somehow be smoothed out. The prison, he insists, 'is an authoritarian community, and it will remain



an authoritarian community no matter how much the fact of the custodians' power may be eased by a greater concern for the inmates' betterment' (Sykes, 1958: 133). On the other hand, it offers nought for the comfort of reactionaries who think that penal power can be rendered efficient and uncompromising, though some may feel that his conclusions on this point now look rather sanguine in light of subsequent experience (Crewe, 2009; Simon, 2000). 'The maintenance of order', he asserts, 'does not necessarily require that excess of caution which seeks to eliminate the very possibility of any "incident" without regard to the inmate's fearful loss of self-determination' (loc. cit.). In this way, the book itself – its legacy and implications – becomes a focus of disagreement in subsequent arguments. It helps us to understand why *The Society of Captives* exercised such a hold not just on academic commentators but on progressive practitioners in the next couple of generations. It is, by the same token, why Sykes is so roundly criticized from the Right by, for example, DiIulio (1987) thirty years later – because he has become identified with what is now represented as a 'failed' liberal position. That is, critics of various stripes come to regard him not just as describing but as *representing* practices of imprisonment that they find either desirable or objectionable.

For these reasons, I suggest, revisiting Sykes's formulation of problems – and the particular terms in which he enunciated these – is illuminating. This is not primarily because it allows us to judge whether he was 'wrong' or 'right', or whether he somehow failed to achieve some superhuman standard of prescience, but as way of reflecting upon all that has and has not changed in the interim.

In some respects, *The Society of Captives* resembles its near contemporary C. Wright Mills's *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), perhaps the other most obvious example of a sociological text of the 1950s that is still widely read today. Mills depicts a field faced with a dilemma between the unattractive options of 'grand theory' and 'abstracted empiricism' – a distinction that may never

have been entirely adequate but which nonetheless came to define many readers' sense of what was at stake (and which for this reason remains a token of exchange to this day). He also famously argues that sociology enables us to trace the relationships between private troubles and public issues and this between history and biography. When we are most apt to feel that our lives 'are a series of traps', in the book's famous opening line (1959: 3) is precisely when we need to more clearly grasp these coordinates, and hence better understand what aspects of our social world 'can and must be structurally changed' (1959: 174).

There are many reasons why *The Sociological Imagination* has survived as an active presence in our intellectual culture when the overwhelming majority of its contemporaries have not. These have much to do with its insight and prescience. Brewer (2004), for example, points out that Mills anticipates themes concerning societal risk and ontological security that did not become central topics of social theory until three decades later (Beck et al., 1994). However, Brewer maintains, neither the foresight nor the longevity make *The Sociological Imagination* any less importantly or intensely a work of its time. Indeed, a richer re-reading of the text depends, in Brewer's view, on how the collisions of history and biography affected Mills's own embattled life and career – the book's theme was the very topic that he was struggling to resolve in writing it. Behind the positions that he stakes out, and the social types that he identifies (the grand theorist, the academic 'statesman' and so on) are real individuals (not just Parsons and Lazarsfeld whom he names but many others, now relatively obscure), with many of whom Mills found himself in lasting and bitter conflict. The very energy that he poured into those struggles helps us to comprehend how he came to write a book that to some degree transcended that context. Few contemporaries reviewed the book favourably, or remembered Mills with any kindness (Horowitz, 1983). Brewer argues that it is by understanding these coordinates that we can better grasp the traps that Mills himself was attempting to escape, and hence why he wrote *this* book in *this* form, the one that we still read and

remember. It is an early instance of what Pierre Bourdieu later called sociology 'as a martial art' (Bourdieu, 2010), in which Mills is certainly settling personal scores but at the same time transmuting personal travail into sociological insight. Conversely, but unsurprisingly therefore, it is only years later and after Mills's death, that the discipline begins to assimilate *The Sociological Imagination* into the canon, perhaps on the basis of a more dispassionate view of the quality of the argument (Brewer, 2004: 330).

If many people disliked Mills, few had a bad word to say about Sykes. However, the argument here is that he too responded in a passionate manner to the particular circumstances of his own time and that this is illuminating in terms of our preparedness to review our appreciation of what he wrote and why. There is of course a long and deep discussion about the relationships between meaning and context in the history of ideas that exceeds my competence, or the space available, to engage with properly (Skinner, 1998a; Bevir, 1999). If we dare summarize any of that in a few words, it might be to say that the recovery of the meaning of works in context is both historical and intertextual (Skinner, 1998b) – it concerns both the events and demands that prompt an author's response to the world, and the environment of other texts and vocabularies that shape its terms.

Why, and perhaps more particularly *how*, does this matter in the case of Sykes and *The Society of Captives*? I introduced the parallel case of *The Sociological Imagination* in order to indicate how a work that we regard as known, and of fairly settled meaning, can be read again as something much more situated, engaged and hence perhaps more challenging and surprising than we thought. In some respects, this constitutes a benefit for the reading of any 'classic' text. If we properly understand how fervently, thoughtfully and earnestly Durkheim responded to the events and debates of his times we can never again be satisfied with the two-dimensional textbook account of

his work (Lukes, 1985; Cotterrell, 1999). It develops our understanding of Weber's sometimes forbidding writing to grasp his 'social attachments and intellectual engagements' (Scaff, 2011: 5).

I argue below that the somewhat 'standard' readings of Sykes that Bottoms, Hay and I, and numerous others, have offered over the years, whilst certainly not 'wrong', tend to be quite limited and partial. In particular, they (including we) may have downplayed aspects of his work that mattered a great deal to him at the time of writing. These contextual aspects should figure in our appreciation of him now, because they affect our sense of what animates that work. Conversely, some aspects of Sykes's views that are conventionally seen as quite central (his commitment to 'functionalism', for example, or his interpretation of key features of prisoner society as 'internally produced' (Sykes and Messinger, 1960)) seem much less important, and potentially misleading. Moreover, whereas *The Society of Captives* is an acknowledged classic, almost all of Sykes's other work<sup>5</sup> is completely unread today. Yet when we look at even a fraction of it, we immediately see the generative problem of *The Society of Captives* in a somewhat different light. I think what emerges is a more political reading of Sykes's work, more directly prompted by and certainly more involved in the events and problems of its time than we have tended to think. Ironically, perhaps, this makes his views *more* open and available to contemporary re-evaluations and applications.

### *Sykes in situ*

As most authorities nowadays clearly acknowledge (Western, 2007; Schammas, 2017), and as Sykes himself states plainly on several occasions, his outlook – and certainly his approach to prisons – was influenced in important ways by his experiences in the Second World War and the post-war political

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<sup>5</sup> The obvious exception is of course Sykes and Matza (1957). If one's fate as a scholar is to be known for two of many works, sixty years later, then these two constitute a fair return by any reasonable standard. They are respectively perhaps the most important book ever written about prisons and what Stanley Cohen (pers. comm.) once described as 'the most important paper ever written in criminology'.

environment in and beyond the United States. Sykes was born in 1922, saw active service in the US Army (ending the war with the rank of Captain), and did not complete his university education until several years after the war.

We need not doubt that Sykes's project in *The Society of Captives* is influenced both by his wartime experiences and by its Cold-War setting because he tells us so repeatedly. Thus in the Introduction to the book he says:

In an era when a system of total power has changed from a nightmare of what the future might be like to a reality experienced by millions, questions concerning the theory and practice of total power take on a new urgency. Do systems of total power contain inherent pathologies, in the sense that there are strains and tensions in the structure which must inevitably crack the monolithic concentration of power?...” (1958: xv)

And, returning to the theme a page or so later:

Perhaps these and similar issues cannot be solved at the most general level...In the meantime, *we can examine particular types of total power and hope to enlarge our understanding...through the knowledge gained from the specific case.*” (1958: xvi, my emphasis).

I propose that we begin by taking Sykes at his word. The investigation of the prison, understood by him as a specific kind of system of action, is here presented by Sykes as one of a number of possible

case studies of a common problem, namely the 'types of total power' in modern societies. Perhaps it is for this reason that Sykes is at such pains to assert the seemingly overwhelming nature of the prison's formal powers. After all, he affirms in the very last section of the Postscript (explaining why he has had so little to say in the course of the book about reformation of conduct or other traditional rationales for penal action), 'our major concern, as I have said, is with the prison as a system of power' (1958: 132). Similarly, the first references to the concept of power in Chapter 3 ('The defects of total power') speak to its special character in the context of imprisonment. In their mixed roles as providers, captors, administrators and rule-givers, the power of the custodians displays 'a merging of legislative, executive and judicial functions that has long been regarded as the earmark of complete domination' (1958: 41). Sykes immediately acknowledges that these powers are to some degree constrained by external oversight but he nevertheless concludes that 'within these limitations the bureaucracy of the prison is organized around 'a grant of power which is without an equal in American society' (1958: 42).

In this way, Sykes explains his almost entire lack of interest in the 'penological' aspects of the prison as a site of correction or reformation of conduct. It is for him in the first place a test case for a very different set of questions about the concentration of power in institutions. Indeed, we may go so far as to hazard that its being 'without an equal' in respect of its 'grant of power' is exactly why he chose to study it. If the 'monolith' of total power turns out to be 'cracked' (1958: 52) this poses intractable, practical problems for those who must administer and operate it. It compels them to do so on the basis of a realistic understanding of the limits as well as the scope of their capacities. Yet if this is their tragedy, it is not the worst possible outcome. Let us return to the series of questions that Sykes raises in the Introduction. Immediately after introducing the very idea of there being cracks in the monolithic concentration of power he raises two contrasting possibilities:

Do types of resistance such as apathy, corruption, and the hard bedrock of informal human ties which are present in every social system, curtail the power of the rulers? Or is total power a juggernaut capable of crushing all opposition, a form of social organization as viable as more democratic modes? (1958: vx-vxi)

Sykes chooses the prison because in his view it edges as close as an institution in a democratic society can do to one pole of social possibility – it ‘represents a social system in which an attempt is made to create and maintain total or almost total social control’ (1958: xiv). The prison is in this sense a kind of anomaly in that it is an autocracy within a democratic culture. Yet it is no aberration, and he is also at pains to emphasize in the very opening pages of the Introduction its persistence over time. The crux of the matter – which is also the heart of Sykes’s idea of totalitarian rule – lies in the conjunction between rational administration<sup>6</sup> and ‘total social control’: ‘The combination is a fearful one, for it is the basis of the calculated atrocities of the concentration camp and the ruthless exploitation of the Soviet *lager*’ (1958:xv)<sup>7</sup>. The American prison is not these things (it is ‘not planned with an eye to annihilating its captive population’). Yet what is left to it is then ‘an odd combination of confinement, internal order, self-maintenance, punishment and reformation’. Even so ‘attempts to exercise total social control...would all seem to be cut on much the same pattern and the prison appears to offer many clues to the structure and functioning of the new leviathan’ (ibid).

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<sup>6</sup> Intriguingly, although Sykes is commonly identified with mid-century American functionalism, and assigned by subsequent commentary (owing mainly to his famous paper with Sheldon Messinger) to the side of debates that emphasizes the internally generated features of captive society, his most frequent reference in *The Society of Captives* (a notoriously lightly referenced book) is to Weber on bureaucracy.

<sup>7</sup> For these reasons, Sykes’s work has attracted some passing interest from students of totalitarianism, properly so-called. Some have noted, for example, that Sykes does refer to Bettelheim’s work, just as they have wondered why he does not allude to Hannah Arendt. The distinction, I suspect, is that whilst Sykes is indeed preoccupied by the shadow of totalitarian regimes, his analysis prompts him instead to wonder why American prisons are not more like the Gulag or the camps. See further: <https://hac.bard.edu/amer-mundi/are-american-prisons-totalitarian-2012-08-30>

Perhaps I overstate the significance of a handful of remarks in the introduction to a text best known for its ironic and incisive examination of the less expected features of institutional life – the unacknowledged cooperation, the unanticipated outcomes of certain ‘adaptations’ and so on. Yet it seems to me that in these few pages Sykes does something much bolder and more radical than is usually acknowledged. He has likened aspects of the American maximum security prison to the Soviet labour camp, not in retrospect as we might safely do, but in the days immediately following the Hungarian uprising of 1956. He has spoken of the American prison as an example, a case or test of propositions concerning the operation of total social control; and he has floated a thought experiment against the drift of his own argument: might total power not after all be a ‘juggernaut capable of crushing all opposition’?

As every reader of Sykes knows, in the world of the prison that he actually studies, ‘total power’ in this sense never obtains. The defects and cracks in the monolith are also the mitigations that impede it from ever attaining the status of the overwhelming ‘juggernaut’. It is not Orwell’s ‘boot stamping on a human face – forever’. So, when Sykes comes to list the defects of total power in summary form, the tone involves some sense of relief:

The lack of a sense of duty among those who are held captive, the obvious fallacies of coercion, the pathetic collection of rewards and punishments to induce compliance, the strong pressures toward the corruption of the guard in the form of friendship, reciprocity, and the transfer of duties into the hands of trusted inmates – all are structural defects in the prison’s system of power rather than individual inadequacies’. (1958: 61)



At this point it is most common to turn one's attention to Sykes's discussion of the intrinsic deprivations of confinement (the famous five 'pains of imprisonment') and their role in stimulating more cohesive or more individuating 'adaptations'. This is after all the next step that Sykes himself takes in the book and is a justly celebrated aspect of *The Society of Captives*. Indeed, these roles are central to his depiction of the social relations of 'captive society' throughout. However, in keeping with the more political reading of Sykes's purposes that I propose here, I want to focus instead on what I take to be his implicit theory of collective action. As is well known, Sykes turns in chapter six of *The Society of Captives* to questions of 'Crisis and Equilibrium', and presents what many see nowadays as a very sketchy and underdeveloped account of prison riots. However, I suggest that if we consider Sykes's understanding of collective action questions a bit more broadly, we see both a greater coherence, including a consistency of interest that extends beyond the confines of this book, and a more urgent connection to key challenges of his times.

#### *Collective action, resistance and negotiation*

Sykes's account of prison riots, stimulated by two major incidents that had taken place at the New Jersey State Prison a few years earlier, is often considered to be one of the points at which *The Society of Captives* most clearly shows its origins in structural-functionalism. Quite a few observers, including Bottoms, Hay and me (Sparks et al., 1996: 44), have focused on the cybernetic aspects of Sykes's language at this point. Within the prison's 'system of action', Sykes says, we can observe a 'cyclical rhythm, from order to disorder to order' (1958: 110). We (loc. cit.) argued that this gave rise to a view of riots that was too 'neatly patterned' and which understated the quotients of force and resistance in Sykes's depiction of penal social relations. I still don't find the idea of a 'cyclical rhythm' very persuasive; but on the other hand I no longer see it as central to Sykes's view of collective disturbances.

Sykes, indeed, suggests some caution about the language of cycles and rhythms. The prison, he says, is '*not* what the economist would call a self-regulating or self-correcting mechanism' (1958: 110, my emphasis). Rather than restoring equilibrium, disturbances are likely to multiply (1958: 11). Indeed, he also casts doubt on the very idea of the 'order' from which the 'incident' departs: 'in some ways organization is simply a series of crises held within limits' (1958: 109). The appropriate image for Sykes's idea of the movement from crisis to relative peace is not so much that of the pendulum swinging as something more akin to a tug of war. Similarly, he is careful to point out that the commonplace idea of the 'powder keg' renders the moment of outbreak of a disturbance arbitrary and accidental: 'the explanation for the prison's transition to a state of revolt turns on the occurrence of some spark...apt to be seen as a chance event' (1958: 122). Rather, what is at stake is clearly a struggle over the transfer of power (1958: 123), the outcome of which reveals the basic paradox of the prison's fragile, negotiated order. In Sykes's view, the riots of 1952 occurred at the point where the authorities had determined to take back their eroded authority: 'as the social system of the prison was "reformed" in the direction of the free community's image of what a maximum security prison should be like, the New Jersey State Prison moved towards disaster' (1958: 123). The sobering conclusion is that 'The system breeds rebellions by attempting to enforce the system's rules' (1958: 124).

I think we may still regard this as a limited and rather mechanistic account of the process of prison disturbances, and one that (perhaps to a greater degree than other aspects of Sykes's work) has largely been superseded (Colvin, 1992; Adams, 1992; Carrabine, 2004). But once again Sykes has already advised us of what is more fundamentally at stake:

If the inmate population maintains the right to argue with its captors, it takes on the appearance of an enemy nation with its own sovereignty; and in so doing it raises disturbing

questions about the nature of the offender's deviance. The criminal is no longer simply a man who has broken the law; he has become a part of a group with an alternative viewpoint and thus attacks the validity of the law itself. (1958: 75)

On this view, what remains of interest in Sykes's (self-admittedly sketchy and preliminary) theory of riot is not whether it is correct as to causes, but that it too bears a more explicitly political reading than it usually receives.

In 1965 Sykes moved to the University of Denver. He held a somewhat strategic position there as Director of the Administration of Justice Program during a period of intense social conflict and change in American society (<https://www.asanet.org/about-asa/how-asa-operates/executive-officers/gresham-sykes>). Sykes's work during this period – much of it quite local and applied in focus – has attracted a great deal less attention than *The Society of Captives* or his famous articles with David Matza<sup>8</sup>. Among the more striking products of Sykes's time in Denver is his little known (and latterly more or less completely unreferenced) paper 'Riots and the Police' (1969). In this paper Sykes expressly draws upon his prior work on the prison to inform a discussion of the policing of urban disorders. Indeed, he draws a strikingly close comparison between black people's experiences of the ghetto and the prison (1969: 123). In both places, he argues, people 'live in a world of reduced incentives, both positive and negative' (1969: 124). One of the consequences of the repetitive tendency of prison riots he argues is that the 'the future holds little more than a promise of endless frustration, disturbances, and repression' (1969: 125).

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<sup>8</sup> Google Scholar reports several thousand references each for *The Society of Captives* and 'Techniques of neutralization' and hundreds for 'The inmate social system'. It has one reference to 'Riots and the Police', from 1971.

For these reasons the burden of the paper is to argue in favour of negotiation and discussion and against the strongly felt tendency on the part of the Police to answer what many officers viewed as defiance and threats with force. The Police, Sykes argues here, must quell the temptation to see every challenge to their authority as a form of 'moral combat' in which they are compelled to engage in order to protect their claims to legitimate authority (1969: 128). Oppositional politics can be, Sykes argues, a means of building leadership in minority communities. They are also an extension of the forms of voluntary association cherished by many Americans as bastions of democracy against the possibility of overweening State power (1969: 126). Sykes summarizes:

In the first place, no community, whether it is a prison or a city, can be run by force alone over any prolonged period of time, in any sort of stable fashion. The fact that such an arrangement runs counter to our democratic values is important, but so too is the fact that the continued existence of a government based on force alone is virtually impossible. To some extent - probably to a very large extent - people in a community must agree to the rules and be willing to cooperate with the agencies of government. (Sykes 1969: 125)

One cannot argue that 'Riots and the Police' is an influential paper, since nobody reads it. Some might say it is more notable for its heartfelt sincerity and social concern than for its conceptual sophistication. It is illuminating, however, for the analogies it draws between order and control in prison and political authority in other settings. It adopts an advanced position on those questions, inviting us to consider order and control both in and out of the prison context as being akin to political settlements. And it offers certain warnings:

What *is* important, I think, is the political relationship and the power relationship between the white, affluent society and the poor, minority-group community. I have suggested that if anyone tries to make that relationship one of harsh and complete repression, they will create a situation which is far more explosive, far more pregnant with violence, than anything we have seen so far. And the crucial thing, it seems to me, is that the country must learn that in its present concern for law and order, the police are only one small part of a larger set of problems which cannot be solved by coercion." (Sykes, 1969: 129)

Sykes is very explicit about the importance of his views on prisons in forming these conclusions. He also never disavows the functionalist influence on his thinking (Sykes, 2003), and argues throughout his life that that his sense of the complex interrelation of the elements comprising the prison's social system is shaped by that inheritance. But there are abiding themes in his work of power, order, continuity and change that far transcend the bounds of prison studies, narrowly conceived. Indeed it is more accurate to say that these guide his interest towards the prison in the first place. They concern the negotiated character of social order, the nature of power relations in democratic societies, and the shadow of totalitarian power that is never wholly absent from his attention.

## Conclusions

In this essay, I have suggested that returning to *The Society of Captives* with an eye to the surrounding contexts of political-culture that Sykes addressed in writing it can help us to identify a bit more clearly some of its central and abiding concerns. This is why I have taken the trouble to write a largely exegetical paper about a very well-known text. It is also why I have thought it worth exploring the already widely-acknowledged point that it was written during the depths of the Cold War. The *problematique* of *The Society of Captives* is and remains the nature of power in institutions

of domination. The conceptual value of studying prisons, seen in this light, is that they are specific, socially and physically bounded instances of this problem.

Sykes famously concludes that the apparently monolithic character of 'total power' in the new Jersey State prison in the 1950s was 'cracked'. Much else in his discussion – and hence in subsequent studies of prisons – flows from this recognition. As we have noted above Sykes concludes that the prison is destined to remain an 'authoritarian community'. Yet, he continues, 'There are, however, many possible authoritarian communities, and some are preferable to others' (1958: 133). The community that he studied generated its own set of problems and possibilities of living – its 'pains' and 'adaptations'. In this sense, the multitude of different possible empirical predicaments (the ones that many of us have spent a great deal of time and effort exploring in subsequent work) are of critical importance in understanding what it means to work or live in any of the world's actual or imaginable prisons. The theoretical core, however, is the disposition of power that gives rise to them.

Does this mean that all systems of power are similarly 'cracked'? I fear not, or not at least that they are all cracked in similar ways. Space forbids me from embarking here on the dizzying number of ways in which subsequent prisons have used variations on the themes of force, isolation, inducements, threats, routines, surveillance and so on to mitigate those challenges. Nor can we explore the perhaps rarer instances of creativity, compassion or democratic engagement. If I were to impute an answer to Sykes himself, however, it would be something like: 'we had better at least hope so'. The perfect system of power was the other, negative pole of possibility that history had given him every reason to fear. The residual hope in *The Society of Captives* is precisely that he did not encounter it in the New Jersey State Prison. The cracks in the monolith are the narrow spaces through which agency, meaning, sociality and solidarity creep back in. Amongst the reasons why I

have thought it worthwhile considering some of Sykes's lesser-known later work is that some of those resources of hope are a bit clearer there.

None of this is intended to argue that there is a single, correct reading of Sykes's work, or any other (still less to argue for Sykes's correct views on everything). We need not begin from the same point now, nor seek to re-write the same book. We would not start in a place so inattentive towards questions of gender or race, for example. Indeed, part of the value of revisiting classic texts is to try to prise them open afresh and where necessary to confront their silences. I have only tried to show that his work can still speak to us in usable and creative ways, despite the widening gaps of time and experience between us, and that this is at least in part because there is a tough kernel of theoretical curiosity in it. One of its intriguing features is that a piece of work sometimes viewed as arguing that the prison is a rather self-contained entity, turns out to be so intensely engaged with the political conflicts and dilemmas of its time, some of which abide into our own.

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