Crime, Media, Culture

http://cmc.sagepub.com

Book Review: Dress Behind Bars: Prison Clothing as Criminality: by Juliet Ash London: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2010, 225 pp, ISBN 978-1-85043-894-6 (PB)

Yvonne Jewkes

Crime Media Culture 2010; 6; 118
DOI: 10.1177/1741659010006010801

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://cmc.sagepub.com

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

Dress Behind Bars: Prison Clothing as Criminality

by Juliet Ash
London: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2010, 225 pp, ISBN 978-1-85043-894-6 (PB)

Reviewed by Yvonne Jewkes, University of Leicester

While visiting a prison workshop recently, I was somewhat taken aback to find that one of the many manufacturing industries in which prisoners are employed is producing shirts for professional league football teams. While we have become accustomed to the idea of such corporations taking advantage of cheap labour in sweatshops on the other side of the world, the discovery that your favourite team's shirt may have been sewn by someone in the English prison system earning just a few pounds a week might be considered equally exploitative. The ironic relationship between prison labour and clothing (not only are they making the shirts of affluent sportsmen who they cannot actually go and watch, but inmates have also long been tasked with making the drab, ill-fitting garments that they wear themselves) is just one of the many subjects addressed by Juliet Ash, a Tutor in Fashion and Textiles at the Royal College of Art in London, in *Dress Behind Bars: Prison Clothing as Criminality.*

Actually being about much more than the clothes worn behind bars, Dress Behind Bars might more accurately be described as an examination of state control of the body of the imprisoned:

> *The regulation of clothing has prevailed for more than two hundred years as a repressive instrument of punishment. The history of prison clothing is partly about the social construction of the wrong doer by the State and according to prevalent penal policies. Its significance also lies in the intricate interweaving of politics and the construction of self in confinement. Prison authorities globally employ a variety of techniques of normalisation in the attempt to control the reconstruction of the prisoner's identity through clothes. (p. 164)*

Here in a nutshell is the scope of the book: it examines the origins behind particular prison dress styles from 1800 to the present, the messages inscribed in its form and shape, and its role as a signifier of power, control, conformity, humiliation, subversion and resistance. From nineteenth- and early twentieth-century pyjama-style prison uniforms to the orange jumpsuits of Guantanamo, this fascinating book describes not only prison clothing and inmates' feelings about it, but also what that clothing tells us about the history of penal reform and the wider culture, including the entertainment media. So intertwined are media representations with reality (or at least, public perceptions of reality)

that film references, including *In the Name of the Father* (1993, dir. Sheridan), *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994, dir. Darabont) and *The Birdman of Alcatraz* (1962, dir. Frankenheimer), crop up throughout the book. And, in the final chapter, Ash discusses the ubiquitous *Bad Girls*, *Porridge* and *Prisoner Cell Block H*, but impressively also takes in acclaimed BBC drama *Criminal Justice* (shown in July 2008) and *Carandiru* (2003, dir. Babenco), a Brazilian film about the killing of 111 inmates by police officers during a riot at the Penitentiary of that name in São Paulo.

Inevitably in a study of this scope, there are some gaps and omissions, and a few sections feel superfluous or unconnected from the broader discussion. For example, the sections on gender and class in relation to prison clothing in the early nineteenth century (pp. 16–18) are too short and superficial (though admittedly less short and superficial than the later passage devoted to contemporary prison clothing in private prisons, which warrants a mere half-a-page). The analysis of gender and class is based on the famous engraving by Oldham-Barlow of Elizabeth Fry visiting Newgate Prison, which manages to be both sentimental and overtly moralistic and therefore says more about middle-class, early Victorian attitudes to 'fallen women' than it does about the reality of nineteenth-century prison conditions. However, as the author notes, in the context of the 'malign neglect' that characterized prisons at this time, clothing should be recognized as contributing to the disregard for prisoners' moral and physical welfare and, for the majority of the book's chronological journey through three centuries, Ash succeeds in using the history of dress to personalize the history of the social power relations of the prison.

Among the most interesting discussions are those on the origins of the prison garments now regarded as iconic: the broad arrows that decorated prisoners' uniforms in Britain and its colonies, Australia and Tasmania, in the nineteenth century but persisted, Ash tells us, even after their official abolition in the 1920s, and the distinctive black-and-white stripes on prison clothing in the USA which first emerged in around 1815. Both examples have achieved a certain fame and notoriety due to their representation in cultural forms (and illustrative cartoons and stills from movies are reproduced here, as well as photographs of serving prisoners wearing the distinctive designs). Since the days of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, who both appeared in early films wearing them, arrows and stripes have become 'iconic signifiers of criminality for the public spectator' (p. 50). Ash informs us that the broad arrow mark was taken from the head of the pheon carried by the King in the fourteenth century and that it became a heraldic device denoting that anything carrying the mark was the property of someone with authority, power and wealth. Imprinted on the clothing of convicts, the arrow became a mark of humiliation, indicating not only that the garment was the property of the state, but that the body within it was similarly owned (pp. 22–3). The soles of prisoners' boots were also indelibly imprinted with the arrow so that, as one prisoner put it, 'whatever ground you trod you left traces that Government property had travelled over it' (O'Donovan Rossa, 1882; cited on p. 50). Less well known but equally fascinating are the parti-coloured, harlequin-style uniforms found in prisons as diverse as Newgate, New York and Gloucester Prison in England; garb which caused Oscar Wilde to note

that prisoners were grotesque clowns 'whose hearts are broken … specially designed to appeal to the sense of humour' (Wilde, 1905; cited on p. 57). In a contemporary manifestation of the same desire to humiliate are the prisons in two American states, Arizona and Texas, which issue inmates with pink clothing. It is believed that the feminization of men by handing out garments, including underwear, dyed pink acts as a deterrent.

Dress Behind Bars is divided into seven chapters, the first five of which chronologically chart the relationship between prison dress, penal reform and political thinking on both sides of the Atlantic, especially the numerous and sometimes extreme right-wing and left-wing backlashes against the prevailing penal culture. The linking of prison clothing with shifts in penal aims and with broader social and political changes enables Ash to add detail to, and personalize, subjects that many readers may be familiar with; among them the plight of Suffragettes in the early twentieth century, the support shown by women Republican prisoners to the men staging protests at the Maze Prison in Northern Ireland in the 1970s (their solidarity with the 'Blanket protesters' involved refusing to wash or change their clothes) and, in the same decade, the well-meaning experiments (which included the relaxation of distinctions in clothing) that characterized Barlinnie Prison, a short-lived Special Unit for maximum security inmates. More recently, Ash notes that the re-emergence of chain gangs in the United States has been accompanied by the return of the black-and-white striped uniform, and that it is no coincidence that both have been reintroduced at a time of populist punitiveness and a dramatic rise in incarceration rates.

Among the subjects covered in the final two chapters is the way in which prisoners appropriate or customize institutional clothing as a means of identity-construction and preserving their sense of self. One notable indicator of both lifestyle aspirations and the need to signal something of one's pre-prison identity is footwear. During research I conducted at a maximum security prison a decade ago, I observed that most of the prisoners I met were young and streetwise, and they literally wore their masculine credentials on their feet. Their new and expensive designer-label trainers indicated a desire to fit in with the dominant norms, and yet also suggested a degree of competitiveness; for some inmates it seemed important not to get left behind in the rapidly moving worlds of fashion and footwear technology (Jewkes, 2002). The revelation in *Dress Behind Bars* that notorious London gangster Reggie Kray received the gift of a Harrods shirt from US astronaut, Buzz Aldrin, and the quote from ex-prisoner Erwin James about the importance of preserving sartorial smartness as a means of resistance to the control and power exercised by officers in their military-style uniforms, also reminded me of a Dutch prisoner I met in an English medium security prison during the same research project. While resigned to wearing a shabby, threadbare prison uniform handed down through generations of prisoners, his feet were clad in expensive, elegant, highly polished, brown leather brogues. This man admitted that it was important for him to be allowed to wear his shoes, not only to maintain a sense of himself as a man of taste and culture, but also to signal to the other inmates and, importantly, to the prison officers that he was different, more refined, than they (Jewkes, 2002).

Of course, not only does style 'outside' influence dress 'inside', but 'inside' trends also shape what is considered 'cool' outside, and much fashion (especially street clothing) originates in prisons. For example, low-slung jeans revealing underwear beneath are said to derive from the confiscation of belts in prison, while the terms 'box fresh' or 'prison fresh' denote gleaming trainers which have not had an opportunity to get scuffed up outdoors. Ash also introduces us to several companies which have succeeded in subverting and commercializing the stigmatized clothing of prison inmates, including one – Prison Blues – which is a design and manufacturing company set up by inmates at a Federal prison in the US. The commercialization of prison is another subject that evokes mixed responses but there is no doubt that such ventures sate public fascination with incarceration, as witnessed by the success of the Malmaison hotel that was once Her Majesty's Prison Oxford, and the charity Fine Cell Work which sells cushions stitched by serving prisoners, depicting images including tattoos, a smoking gun and a stick calendar scratched into a prison wall (www.finecellwork.co.uk).

Although Ash charts the attempts in some countries to 'improve' prison clothing in accordance with broad social democratic principles (Sweden), technological advancement (the Netherlands) or simply taking both prisoners and prison staff out of uniform in order to allow both to assert their identities and establish rapport (Poland), she underlines the inherent complexities and contradictions in such moves and the frequency with which well-meaning initiatives fail. The overriding message is that prison clothing has always been an integral part of the punishment of society's disadvantaged and disenfranchised. It is designed to shame, not rehabilitate, and, as we have recently seen with the adoption of highly visible fluorescent jackets for offenders serving community sentences and the orange jumpsuits synonymous with Guantanamo, prison clothing as 'raiments of shame' always emerges at politically expedient moments.

Reference

Jewkes, Y. (2002) *Captive Audience: Media, Masculinity and Power in Prisons*, Cullompton: Willan.