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Understanding prison riots

Towards a threshold theory

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Abstract

This article formulates a theoretical framework that helps to explain the origins of prison riots. Our explanation builds on existing theories, taking the integrative theory outlined by Useem and Kimball (1989) as a starting point. It shows how a variety of causal factors interact to create an institutional environment in which routine incidents can develop into full-fledged riots. We illustrate our framework with an analysis of the Strangeways prison riot in Manchester, UK (1990).

Key Words

crisis management • prison leadership • prison riots • riot theory • Strangeways

INTRODUCTION

Despite their high media profile and serious consequences, research on prison riots remains sparse (Wilsnack, 1976; Useem and Kimball, 1989; Adams, 1994).[1] The few available theories diverge widely and are not easily squared (Martin and Zimmerman, 1994). Riots have been tested against inhumane conditions, bad food, brutal staff, economic factors, racial tensions, incarceration rates, political dis-empowerment, the presence of young violent prisoners, external social upheavals, building-design problems and overcrowding. With this (nonexhaustive) shopping list of 'causes' in hand, individual riots are easily explained by weaving various 'pathogens' into a convincing narrative; when we take a number of riots, however, no general pattern seems to emerge.[2] In his writing about prison riots in Scotland during the late 1980s, Coyle (1991: 141) captures the point well:

> Several reasons have been advanced for all or each of these disturbances. What seems most likely is that there has been no one identifiable cause. There have been a series of contributory factors, one or more of which may have applied in each incident. These factors came together at a particular time, either with a degree of pre-planning or with comparatively little organisation. One particular catalyst then sparked off the disturbance.

It is no wonder, then, that both academics and practitioners have come to emphasize the inevitability of prison riots (Adams, 1994).[3] In their examination of several American prison riots, Useem, Camp and Camp (1996:16) conclude that even 'comprehensive planning based on awareness of other incidents and lessons learned from the past cannot prevent all prison riots.' Outlining the rules for Correctional Emergency Planning, Freeman (1996: 11) advises that 'planning should be based on the assumption [that] an emergency can occur without warning, at any time of the day or night.' These findings suggest that the only sure way of preventing riots is to create a security state within the prison walls (a 'lock-down' in prison terms). This is an option that commands little support among most European and North American prison professionals.

We are not concerned with identifying particular contributory factors or catalysts, but, rather, with the processes that allow these factors to develop. We seek to move beyond the mere 'cataloguing' of factors and formulate a theory of prison riots that will enable prison administrators to prevent prison riots without suffocating the climate within an institution. Importing insights from disaster and crisis studies, our explanation builds on existing riot theories and takes the integrative theory outlined by Useem and Kimball (1989) as a starting point. Our theoretical framework helps to explain how causal factors interact and remove the many barriers that separate routine incidents from full-fledged riots. It demonstrates that much must go wrong, for quite some time, before a prison explodes into collective violence. It also implies that prison administrators have many opportunities to prevent a riot from occurring.

Before presenting our framework, we briefly recapitulate the state of the art in the theory of prison riots. In section 2, we summarize Useem and Kimball's (1989) theory and formulate two important additional questions. Section 3 outlines our theoretical framework. We illustrate our theoretical arguments in section 4 with findings of the official inquiry into the Strangeways prison riot, the worst riot in the United Kingdom to this date (Woolf, 1991).

STARTING POINT: USEEM AND KIMBALL'S THEORY OF ADMINISTRATIVE BREAKDOWN

Most explanations of prison riots fall, broadly speaking, into one of two categories. The first type of approach, conventional and intuitively acceptable, presents riots as a natural response to poor prison conditions (see Scraton, Sim and Skidmore, 1991). The idea of conditions causing riots is taken directly from deprivation theory, one of a number of mainstream sociological theories that explain social revolts and rioting (Rule, 1988; Miller, 1999). It tells us that prisoners will revolt in the face of food shortages, overcrowding, oppressive custodial discipline, sadistic staff, racism or other unpleasant circumstances.

Most reports of prison riots mention bad conditions. But while there appears to be some support for the idea that stress and deprivation provoke prison riots (Wilsnack, 1976: 69), conditions alone cannot explain them. Prisons with terrible conditions have remained free of riots, whereas riots did occur in prisons in which conditions had been recently improved (as we will see, this was also the case in Strangeways). Conditions in North American prisons gradually improved after World War Two, but that same period witnessed an upsurge of riots and staff hostage taking.

In Scotland, HMP Shotts was opened in 1987 to replace HMP Peterhead. The new, spacious, well-appointed prison was designed for long-term prisoners who would live in single cells with integral sanitation; the prison features a gymnasium as well as education, training and work complexes. The prison is easily accessible, as it sits just off the connecting motorway with good rail and bus links. Significant thought went into ensuring that incident risk factors relating to conditions, overcrowding, and distance from home were minimized. Within its first five years, the prison had suffered four riots with staff hostages taken and substantial damage done to the facilities. Clearly, other factors were at work. Poor prison conditions as the sole causal factor of prison riots must therefore be refuted (cf. Aya, 1990).

The second type of approach locates the roots of trouble in the social texture of prisons. Such explanations build on the observation that prisoners and prison administrators typically enter into some sort of working relationship. This relationship is, of course, not entirely voluntary in nature and therefore rather precarious. But as long as it works for both groups, the accompanying set of behavioural guidelines helps to keep the peace in prison. This approach is in line with classic, sociological breakdown theories, which predict that the rapid erosion of institutional and social structures will cause people to go haywire (Useem, 1985). Prison sociologists have adopted their own version of breakdown theory, which predicts collusion between prison officers and prisoners; the officers are typically portrayed as an insecure and mostly ineffective lot depending on powerful prisoner leaders to keep order (and thus keep the prison officers out of trouble).[4] When the accepted status quo is threatened or altered, prisoners will be motivated to riot according to this type of explanation. The trouble with this explanation can be illustrated by that paradoxical finding of the Woolf Inquiry (and other riot investigations): as conditions had *improved* before the riot, rioting prisoners are cast as a mindless mass, unable to deal with change (even when the situation changes for the better).

In a major theoretical advance, Useem and Kimball (1989) formulated a theory that brings the various explanations together. Riots, they conclude, take place in prisons that 'sap the ability to contain disturbances' and 'convince inmates that conditions are unjust' (Useem and Kimball, 1989: 218). These two conditions emerge in 'prisons with a particular sort of pathology,' a type of organization they describe in terms of administrative breakdown or 'systemic crisis' (Useem and Kimball, 1989: 218–19). The authors thus explain riots as a function of eroding or evaporating administrative structures (see also Goldstone and Useem, 1999). They restrict the breakdown concept to the administrative side of the prison's institutional structure, shifting away from the traditional emphasis on the social dimension of the prison: 'the key factor is not organisation of inmates but disorganisation of the state' (Useem and Kimball, 1989: 218). This shift is in line with the increased interest in, and appreciation of, the importance of managerial and administrative factors in prison studies (DiIulio, 1987, 1991; Johnson, 1996; Boin, 2001).

According to Useem and Kimball (1989: 219), administrative breakdown is at the root of collective violence: 'prior to all riots we studied there was administrative breakdown in control and operation of the prison' (cf. Goldstone and Useem, 1999).[5] The authors remain vague when it comes to defining this crucial concept of administrative breakdown, but its effects are clear. The initiators among the rioting population are

		Inclination to riot	
		Yes	No
Ability to riot	Yes	Normal riot	Riot-prone
	No	Riot-prone	Safe prison

•**Figure 1 Four types of riot proneness**

'motivated by grievances against the state or the guard force' (Useem and Kimball, 1989: 204). The 'arbitrariness and chaos' that apparently come with administrative breakdown 'shatter the presumption of legitimacy' (Useem and Kimball, 1989: 204). The breakdown in control and operation convinces the prisoners that the system is (or has become) vulnerable.

These conditions can be separated into two clusters: prisoner perceptions and administrative strength. A riot, then, is the resultant of changing perceptions and a weakening administration. By juxtaposing these two clusters, we get an initial overview of a vulnerability classification (see Figure 1).

When prisoners are motivated to riot and have the opportunity to do so, a riot must be considered a 'normal' event – in the sense that it can be expected (cf. Perrow, 1999). In a prison where conditions do not give rise to grievances and security is tight, a riot must be considered a highly unlikely event. If prisoners do not riot in the absence of tight security, a prison must still be considered riot-prone. Because when they do become inclined, opportunities abound. When tight security is required to control riot-inclined prisoners, the prison must also be considered riot-prone. One security lapse may be all that is needed for prisoners to start a riot.

Useem and Kimball, however, leave us with two key questions that remain unanswered. First, we do not know what causes administrative breakdown, or, in terms of Figure 1, why a prison 'migrates' from the 'safe' quadrant to the 'normal riot' quadrant. This is an important question, as the answer to it may help to prevent future riots. Useem and Kimball (1989: 222) suggest that prison administrations descend into crisis following the 'imposition of ameliorative standards' and 'fiscal pressures making these standards impossible to meet.' But these factors have, in one way or another, plagued many Western prison systems and can therefore not explain why some prisons suffer riots where most others do not (Cavadino and Dignan, 1992; Feeley and Rubin, 1998; Weiss and South, 1998).

The second question asks why and how conditions of breakdown lead to a prison riot. There are many poorly managed prisons, but, in fact, there are comparatively few riots. In other words, we must pry open the black box of 'systemic crisis' in order to understand why and how Useem and Kimball's mix of adverse conditions leads a prison from persistent administrative failure to a devastating riot.

In answering these questions, we begin by dissecting the concept of administrative breakdown as used by Useem and Kimball. It is, then, helpful to distinguish administrative breakdown from institutional breakdown. In our framework, administrative breakdown refers to the development of administrative pathologies that undermine a prison administration's ability to responsibly adapt well-functioning institutional

structures in the face of imposed change. Institutional breakdown refers to the development of dysfunctional interaction patterns between prisoners and staff. We argue that a sustained period of institutional breakdown sets the stage for a prison riot to occur. But it takes a state of administrative breakdown to sustain (if not fuel) the process of institutional breakdown. Let us now examine our theoretical argument in more detail.

FROM ADMINISTRATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL BREAKDOWN TO RIOT: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A well-functioning prison is characterized by an institutionalized pattern of interaction between staff and prisoners, which prescribes an effective way of dealing with the normal stress (Sykes [1958] refers to the 'pains of imprisonment') of total institutions (Lombardo, 1999; cf. Goffman, 1962). A set of rules, procedures, customs and routines – accepted by both staff and prisoners as legitimate (Sparks and Bottoms, 1995) – then defines a way of interacting that makes it possible for prisoners to deal with their confined living environment; it also helps to make prison officers feel safe and act in a more 'relaxed' way.[6] The institutional structure is essential to the stability of a prison: it provides the 'social glue' that keeps the place together (Sparks, Bottoms and Hay, 1996).

Any variance in these patterned ways of interaction may create instability and assume proportions not easily understood by outsiders (Fox, 1973; Mattick, 1973; Flynn, 1980). Change, whether promoted externally (e.g., political ideology; parole policy) or internally (e.g., movements of prisoners; changes to staff's working arrangements) affects the nature of the interaction between staff and prisoners. In well-managed prisons, any type of change is therefore carefully explained, in a timely fashion, to the prisoner population. Moreover, seasoned administrators know that changes are best implemented in a gradual way, allowing both staff and prisoners to adapt to the new situation.

There are, of course, many structural factors that routinely threaten the 'way things work' in a prison. For example, prisons are tasked with what staff can perceive as conflicting and competing goals (retribution, deterrence and rehabilitation) the result of which can be confusion, leading to role ambiguity and role conflict (Johnson, 1996; Boin, 2001). Prison organizations generally suffer from tight budgets as they tend to lose out against organizations that are perceived to serve more popular and socially desirable goals and client populations (Hargrove and Glidewell, 1990). Moreover, penal policy debates are punctuated by political upheaval, which occurs in the wake of an incident or, more predictably, in pre-election periods.

As long as prison administrators manage to absorb challenges to the institutional structure, adapting it where necessary and taking into consideration the interests of prisoners, imposed change does not have to create problems, let alone cause riots. But we know that prison riots are usually preceded by periods of rapid change (Goldstone and Useem, 1999), which suggests that in these cases prison administrations fail to make such accommodations. We describe this inability to cope with change in terms of administrative breakdown.

THE PATHOLOGICAL PRISON ADMINISTRATION

Prison riots occur, to repeat Useem and Kimball (1989: 218), in 'prisons with a particular sort of pathology'. This pathology, a state of administrative breakdown, is here defined as the failure of a prison administration to preserve a legitimate way of working in the face of external shifts.[7] There is a clear failure to recognize and remedy the problems of adaptation that follow the change in status quo. The pathological prison administration has two defining characteristics.

First, a rift has developed between organizational leaders and staff; an 'appreciative gap' separates the front office from the cell blocks. This gap is widened when leadership strategies to deal with change do not match staff perceptions of the appropriateness of the proposed measures. As dissension between higher and lower-level staff develops, grievances among the uniformed staff mount. Exuberant optimism at the strategic level ('we're on the right track') fuels the perception among staff that their leaders do not understand the 'real problems' at hand. Irritation with staff's resistance to implement leadership visions exacerbates the tension. Most investigations into prison riots identify these factors in the period leading up to the riot (Useem and Kimball, 1989; Goldstone and Useem, 1999).

A second characteristic is, to borrow a concept from the disaster field, an organizational culture of 'collective neglect' (Turner and Pidgeon, 1997: 44). It is never easy to foresee and prevent a disaster from occurring, as the required information is usually scattered throughout an organization and does not easily lend itself to be assembled in a timely and accurate manner. Effectively functioning organizations observe that something is going wrong, but the pathological organization has lost its ability to appreciate these signals.

As a result, the potential consequences of key events are not understood, even if they are easy to observe. Erroneous assumptions with regard to causes and effects allow discrepant events – indicators of impending trouble – to go unnoticed. This can happen because decoys deflect attention from the real problem, or because senior managers use their authority to reinforce a closed view of the world and discourage criticism (Turner, 1994). The organization, then, is lulled to sleep by a persistent reluctance to fear worst outcomes. Moreover, a continuous violation of precautionary measures – which could prevent the disaster from happening – takes place within the organization.

This state of administrative breakdown is the result of leadership failure rather than external contingencies. In every public organization, it is a leadership responsibility to preserve an effective and legitimate operation in the face of continuous pressure (Selznick, 1957; Boin, 2001). This is no easy task. Leaders have to balance between an overriding concern with conserving the 'way things have always been' and a proclivity for change that upsets the precarious institutional balance within a prison.

This concept of leadership responsibility includes the policymaking levels of the prison system. Prisons are usually part of a central agency or department, which is responsible for policymaking, co-ordinating and oversight tasks. They are embedded in a larger institutional structure, which should facilitate safety-enhancing processes at the organizational level. The central failure to do so usually takes one of two forms.

The first failure type is the imposition of reform plans that not only upset the precarious balance within a prison, but also fail to provide either time or resources (usually both) to reach a new balance. Budget cuts tend to raise the ante in prisons, but

good prison administrators usually find a way to deal with such adversity – given enough time. But when central headquarters imposes new plans to 'modernize' the system – plans that are usually sold as 'budget neutral' – it takes very good administrators to implement new blueprints into 'ancient' structures. Moreover, if those at the operational level fail to understand central policy changes or, indeed, do understand but disagree, whether on the policy itself or its implementation, conflict between the field operation and central headquarters becomes a real possibility.

The second failure type pertains to a lack of central oversight. As is the case with all organizations, prison organizations may go through periods of internal tension and trouble. It is only when such situations are allowed to endure that the effects of administrative breakdown become imminent.[8] Administrative breakdown is not an 'invisible' phenomenon; in fact, as Useem and Kimball (1989: 219) note, there are many clear indicators of a prison organization under distress. A state of administrative breakdown is more likely to persist when some sort of breakdown exists in the relations between the prison and prison headquarters.[9]

INSTITUTIONAL BREAKDOWN

A prolonged state of administrative breakdown sets the stage for institutional breakdown. This process of institutional decline is initiated (but not necessarily driven) by a perception of impending change. A seemingly small event, e.g. alterations to the menu, delays in admitting visitors, unexpected lock-ups, or short-notice cancellation of programmes, can easily upset the delicate balance between the keepers and the kept, creating the possibility of aggressive conflictual reactions (Useem and Kimball, 1989; Lombardo, 1999). A differentiated pace of change, where some prisoners benefit but others do not, can quickly promote feelings of relative deprivation – regardless of whether changes, or anticipated changes, are perceived as good or bad (Dinitz, 1981).[10]

In the absence of effective administrative interventions, the perception of impending change will undermine the institutional structure of a prison organization. When previously effective rules and routines are not adequately fitted to a newly emerging situation, their legitimacy erodes. Their dependability to regulate the process is undermined with consequent confusion over how the prison is run (cf. Lombardo, 1999). The delicate balance between staff and prisoners is disturbed.

When this disturbance of previously stable interaction patterns is not mediated, it sets off a vicious circle.[11] Staff begin to act differently, as they try to recreate institutional order. This change in staff behaviour reinforces a perception of change among prisoners. Prisoners challenge staff authority, which, in turn, generates anxiety, stress and low morale among staff. As staff begin to act in a 'cramped' and increasingly inconsistent manner, prisoners become more and more frustrated (Guenther and Guenther, 1974; Lombardo, 1999). Their feelings of discontent are channelled into some dominant ideology (Goldstone and Useem, 1999), which, in turn, generates new forms of adversarial behaviour. This reiterative pattern of changing behaviour and staff-prisoner conflict increases the 'riot vulnerability' of a prison (Fox, 1971; Desroches, 1974; Wilsnack, 1976). And once the spiral is set in motion, it is hard to intervene.

Uncertainty with regard to everyday staff behaviour is the underlying mechanism that fuels this vicious circle (Fox, 1971; Douglas et al., 1980). In the absence of legitimate

rules, officers are not sure how to resolve emerging problems. They do not know how their colleagues resolve these same problems. Prisoners then become confused as to what is expected from them and what type of behaviour will be tolerated. They will play individual prison officers off against each other, in the same vein as kids can play their parents. Experienced prison officers often cite this type of uncertainty as having a negative impact on prison officer-prisoner relations (see Lawes, 1932; Cressey, 1960: 109; DiIulio, 1987; 1991; Fleisher, 1989; Kauffman, 1989; Earley, 1993; De Wit, 1995).

Prisoners, who are completely dependent on their 'bosses' to grant permission to do things that those outside prison take for granted, such as placing a telephone call or taking a shower, also seem to prefer a living environment in which rules and expectations are uniform and clearly spelled out (Seymour, 1977; Sheehan, 1978; Rideau and Wikberg, 1992). According to Toch (1977: 16), prisoners share 'a concern about environmental stability and predictability; a preference for consistency, clear-cut rules, orderly and scheduled events and impingements.' A disrupted institutional structure thus directly affects the well being of most prisoners.

This helps to explain why a substantial number of prisoners join in a riot. Prisoners must have a reason to do so.[12] The prime reason emerging from the literature is the rapid decrease in legitimacy of prison operations or a decline in legitimacy of the prison institution itself (Goldstone and Useem, 1999). In other words, it is less relevant whether prisoners live under 'intolerable conditions' than whether or not prisoners accept these conditions. When prisoners unify behind an ideology that explains their living conditions as illegitimate, a small incident can take on meaning totally disproportionate to the nature of the incident.[13]

FROM TENSION TO RIOT

The next question is how this state of institutional breakdown turns into a riot. The common-wisdom answer refers to the proverbial 'small trigger' that sets off the powder keg (cf. Aya, 1990). This may very well be the case, but we still need to explain why a routine incident can have such effects. We must, in other words, explore how the combination of administrative and institutional breakdown increases the odds of a 'normal riot' (see Figure 1).

An organization's vulnerability to accidents and disasters is a function of the complexity and interdependencies of its parts (Perrow, 1999).[14] The more complex and tightly coupled a prison organization is, the more vulnerable it becomes to the occurrence of riots (and other incidents such as fires, fights or hostage taking). Where a system is both complex and the components are tightly coupled, a small defect can quickly spiral out of control:

> . . . two or more failures, none of them devastating in themselves in isolation, come together in unexpected ways and defeat the safety devices – the definition of a 'normal accident' or system accident. If the system is also tightly coupled, these failures can cascade even faster than any safety device or operator can cope with them, or even be incomprehensible to those responsible for coping. (Perrow, 1999: 3)

A prolonged state of institutional breakdown increases the complexity and tightens the interdependencies within an organizational system. The blurred mix of ill defined and

shifting goals, idiosyncratic practices, confusion and tension makes the prison atmosphere difficult to 'read' and even more difficult to manage. Moreover, the prison organization becomes more tightly coupled. Short-fused and short-staffed, prison officers unwittingly contribute to a widely felt sense of deprivation.

The last barrier between a tense prison and a riot – effective crisis management – has eroded as a direct consequence of administrative and institutional breakdown (Useem and Kimball, 1989; Boin and Van Duin, 1995). Crisis management, in this particular context, pertains to all the hardware and software needed to prevent the escalation of collective violence and, if necessary, to return the situation to normalcy.[15] Routine procedures must make way for critical decision-making, flexibility and innovative thinking. But prisons are typically geared towards facilitating routine processes, making use of the bureaucratic model for organizational structure. Effective crisis management thus requires preparation. Unprepared prison organizations allow small incidents to escalate into serious riots.

To a certain extent, crisis management can be considered an integral feature of a prison officer's job description. Tension and incidents are inherent to the prison; officers are trained to deal with them (even in a poorly managed prison this much appears to be true). Prison sociologists have made much of the putative awareness among staff with respect to their vulnerable position in the face of an overwhelming majority of prisoners. As long as staff remain organized, whereas prisoners typically are not, the staff is not easily defeated.

It is fair to say that in virtually every prison riot we studied, the administrative capacity to deal with crisis incidents was, at best, underdeveloped (cf. Goldstone and Useem, 1999). This fits with our theory. Crisis management training and practices are the first victims of administrative decline (Turner, 1994). Institutional breakdown makes it harder for prison staff to 'keep their eyes on the ball.' Experience teaches us that prison staff who worry about their safety tend to be less attentive to the dangers inherent in the prison work environment. As Useem and Kimball (1989) point out, mental preparation for incidents is as important as physical preparation.

In this complex, tightly coupled prison organization – unprotected by effective crisis management – the odds of an incident escalating into a riot have increased. In such a prison, a riot is indeed a 'normal accident.' Let us now see if the Strangeways riot can be analysed in terms of an accident waiting to happen.

BREAKDOWN AT STRANGEWAYS

The riot in the Manchester prison started on 1 April 1990. During church service, a small group of prisoners overpowered the officers on duty and broke out of the chapel. Within hours, the rioting prisoners took over most of the prison. They managed to access the roof, which allowed them to communicate directly with the media outside the prison. The riot lasted until 25 April when prison staff retook the prison. During the riot, one prisoner had died, 200 individuals were injured, and repair costs had mounted to 60 million English pounds. The riot touched off a string of disturbances in 25 other British prisons.

The Home Secretary appointed Chief Justice Lord Woolf to lead an Inquiry into the causes and consequences of the riots.[16] The Report of the Inquiry contained detailed descriptions of the riots and catalogued a number of causal factors such as the poor

state of most prison buildings, errors of judgement on the part of management and staff, and, of course, the dismal living conditions for the prisoners. The members of the Prison Service 'against heavy odds, have managed over a number of years to contain *an almost impossible situation*' (Woolf, 1991: 1, emphasis added). But the conclusion that the riots were both the logical and inevitable outcome of structural shortcomings was undermined by the recent efforts to *improve* the situation for the prisoners. Lord Woolf and his staff addressed this paradox by pointing to the disruptive nature of change, any change:

> Ironically, when the riots struck in April 1990, the Prison Service had already started to tackle some of the worse features of the prison system [. . .] Long term problems were, for the first time, being confronted. However, as often happens at times of change, the improvements [. . .] brought with them periods of increased instability which made the prison system particularly vulnerable to disturbances. (Woolf, 1991: 1)

The theoretical framework presented above can help us understand the processes leading up to the riots. The application of our framework to the Strangeways riot explains how the combination of administrative breakdown and imposed change created a situation in which a substantial number of prisoners were motivated and able to initiate a riot.

ADMINISTRATIVE BREAKDOWN AT STRANGEWAYS

The Report makes abundantly clear that Strangeways prison suffered from structural administrative deficiencies, which we would describe in terms of administrative breakdown. Administrative failure originated in Prison Service headquarters. The Report concludes that 'there was insufficient clarity about what the Prison Service should be doing and how it should do it. This affected the way prisons were run. Uncertainties about this were one of the underlying causes of the disturbances' (Woolf, 1991: 239).

Just a few years before the riot, Her Majesty's Prison Service had introduced a major policy overhaul under the deceptively optimistic label 'Fresh Start' (Thomas, 1994). In order to bring down costs by 15 percent, staff overtime payments were abolished. The prison officers agreed with the plan, as they were promised a basic salary increase (more money for less hours). But the loss in (overtime) hours was, of course, not compensated by an increase in staff. Prison administrations had to seek for efficiency gains to make up for the loss in hours, if they wished to preserve operation time and safety on the wings. Whereas badly managed prisons were thus induced to tighten efficiency, the well-managed prisons had serious trouble in finding additional savings.

It soon became clear to the Inquiry 'that the structural changes in the management of the Prison Service which had taken place previously [. . .] were having an unsettling effect upon establishments' (Woolf, 1991: 287). In fact, the impact of the Fresh Start reform package resulted in

> prison governors and prison officers believing that the Prison Department had 'moved the goal posts' and reneged on parts of the deal. This led to many Prison Service Staff becoming resentful, feeling that they had been cheated and they had become the victims of the use of 'weasel words'. (Woolf, 1991: 343)

Prison governors, in the words of the Prison Officers' Association, were 'trapped between the justifiable demands of [their] staff for increased numbers and the refusal of Prison Department to even meet its original promises' (Woolf, 1991: 288). The resulting lack of leadership reverberated down the line, as the Woolf Inquiry reports (1991: 506–7). Responsibility was pushed down the line, following 'modern' management principles. But, as we will see, it was precisely at this level of the organization that staff shortage and resentment fuelled a process of institutional breakdown.

Prison Service headquarters was not exactly capable of intervening in the spiralling downfall for which it had laid the groundwork. In 1979, the May Committee had observed 'a gulf' between establishments in the field and headquarters at the Home Office (Woolf, 1991: 287). The Woolf Inquiry concluded that all the changes that had taken place since 1979 'have done nothing to reduce this deep-felt sense of dissatisfaction. In many establishments there is a strong feeling of distrust of Headquarters' (1991: 287).[17] The Woolf Committee described 'a most remarkable dichotomy' within the Prison Service and charted the effects on staff:

> The dissension, division and distrust [exists] between all levels of the Prison Service staff. They labour under a blanket of depression. They lack confidence in the value of what they do. They harbour a deep sense of frustration that the effort which they are devoting to the Service is not appreciated. (Woolf, 1991: 285)

At Strangeways, this gap between management and staff had widened in the years leading up to the riot. Days before the riot, the Prison Inspector applauded the managerial performance of the prison's management team, which had led to considerable improvements in the prison. The governor stated that 'we had come an enormously long way' (Woolf, 1991: 50). The staff did not see it that way. The Woolf Inquiry dryly notes that the many changes 'have convinced some staff that management is more interested in reorganisation than the men and women who make up the Service' (1991: 285). A dispute over staffing levels had deteriorated relationships with management. Understaffed and overworked, discipline had begun to slip. This administrative breakdown in communication prevented the Manchester prison staff from adequately analysing the seriousness of the situation.

INSTITUTIONAL BREAKDOWN

And the situation had indeed become serious. The Woolf Report notes with some surprise how the period leading up to the riot was characterized by a series of improvements. But even if this was the case, a close reading of the report strongly suggests that the pre-riot period was in fact marked by institutional breakdown.

In the months leading up to the riot, the social structure of the prison was severely upset by the influx of hard to manage prisoners. Strangeways received an unusual number of prisoners from dispersal prisons. The 'returnees' had caused trouble in the dispersal prisons; their capacity for troublemaking was, of course, precisely the reason they were sent there in the first place. One of the leading rioters had just returned from a dispersal prison (Woolf, 1991: 226). As one Senior Officer wrote to the Inquiry committee, 'Manchester was becoming the dumping ground for problem prisoners'

(Woolf, 1991: 505). A large contingent of Liverpool prisoners and a substantial number of vulnerable prisoners complemented the population mix. The rapid expansion of the population from 1417 to 1658 (in a prison built for 970) within three months 'contributed to the instability of the prison, engendered hostility on the part of inmates and overburdened the staff' (Woolf, 1991: 47).

The report describes how staff were unable to cope with this situation. The numbers and the mix of prisoners caused concern, but no steps were taken to alleviate the problem. It was apparently difficult to 'provide a consistent and constructive regime' (Woolf, 1991: 48) – the cornerstone of a stable prison. Moreover, the Woolf committee reported that staff members complained about the lack of discipline, which, in the words of one officer, resulted in the undesirable situation that 'inmates virtually had a run of the prison' (1991: 506).

The prisoners, meanwhile, were 'labouring under an intense sense of grievance' (Woolf, 1991: 54). The promise of improved conditions did little to alleviate the conditions in the prison, which 'were still of a wholly unacceptable standard' (Woolf, 1991: 48). Prisoners 'were being locked up for excessive periods of time in overcrowded cells, the vast majority of which had no internal sanitation' (1991: 48). Prisoners regularly did not receive a change of kit after their weekly shower. No work and few activities were offered to the young prisoners. A small minority of the staff 'created the impression among prisoners, whether justified or not, that staff could behave oppressively' (Woolf, 1991: 53).

The Woolf Inquiry also found that the position of prisoners 'became worse as a result of the deterioration in conditions caused by the increase in numbers' (1991: 50). The (few) benefits that had come from the recent improvements 'were reduced or withdrawn in the weeks leading up to the incident because of overcrowding and problems relating to staffing levels. This increased the discontent among inmates' (1991: 105). When the handling of grievances was delegated from the Governor to a lower-level officer, 'this was not understood by the inmates, many of which felt they had been deprived of their entitlement to have their complaints dealt with by the Governor' (1991: 52). The Inquiry concluded, overall, that 'the Prison Service had failed to persuade these prisoners that it was treating them fairly' (1991: 226).

The letters sent to the Inquiry by the prisoners make it clear that the combination of bad conditions and staff attitudes helped them to justify their actions. These letters imply that the management's attention was diverted to resolving staff related problems. As staff took 'their eyes off the ball,' more rules were violated with no corrective action taken. In such a climate, the definition of what is acceptable becomes blurred. Conflict between staff and prisoners emerges from a growing sense among prisoners that the system is not legitimate. Staff will have to address the violence and so the cycle starts on an ever-declining downhill spiral.

In the weeks preceding the riot, a number of incidents signalled an increase in tension (Woolf, 1991: 53). Staff received very specific warnings, which are hard to misjudge by a well-functioning prison organization. Security information was not properly recorded (Woolf, 1991: 55). Even though written notes and recent experience with a previous disturbance (October 1986) suggested that Sunday mass at the Chapel provided the opportunity to riot, no action was undertaken.

The Woolf Inquiry leaves no doubt that adequate crisis management would have

made a significant difference. The Report reads like a catalogue of failure on all dimensions of crisis management. The Security Principal Officer on duty when the riot began agreed that in the period immediately preceding 1 April, the co-ordination of security information was inadequate and the 'practices were lax' (1991: 55). The events of 1 April displayed a remarkable lack of preparedness among staff: 'The fact that relatively junior governors were on duty, who had not received any training in the handling of a major disturbance, contributed to the riot spreading to the whole prison' (1991: 107). The prisoners, as a result, 'were almost certainly astonished that they were able to take control of the whole prison' (1991: 104).

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A THRESHOLD MODEL

Western prison systems (not to mention those in less prosperous parts of the world) contain plenty of unpleasant conditions, incompetent administrators, budget shortages, overcrowding, political disinterest and proverbial 'triggers' to expect many more prison riots than actually occur. Prison riots remain relatively rare events, because much has to go wrong before a riot can occur. Our theory helps to explain why riots occur in some prisons but not in most others.

   Two conditions set the stage for a riot. A state of institutional breakdown creates a highly complex and tightly coupled environment, which motivates prisoners to engage in collective violence. But in order for that to happen, a state of administrative breakdown must facilitate the declining spiral of institutional erosion and render existing safety mechanisms ineffective. Prison riots, then, are the products of administrative and institutional decline, intertwining processes that typically stretch over considerable periods of time.

   Only under the rarest of circumstances is a well-managed prison hit by a sudden prison riot. It may happen when the prisoner population is confronted with an extreme and instant form of system breakdown that radically alters their motivational structure. For instance, even though the US Federal Bureau of Prisons runs one of the best American prison systems (Boin, 2001), it experienced a string of riots among their Cuban population when the State Department unexpectedly announced that all Cuban detainees would be expelled to Cuba. The managerial quality of the federal prison system effectively halted the impact and spread of riots (Useem et al., 1996).

   At the same time, we know that a sustained period of administrative failure does not make a riot an inevitable outcome (many prison systems seem to suffer from sustained periods of administrative failure). Quite paradoxically, perhaps, it may be that in badly managed prisons staff perceives a greater incentive to prevent institutional decline (as they cannot fall back on their administrators) and make their own accommodations with the prisoners (in line with Sykes' [1958] observations). It is only when prison staff remain oblivious and inactive in the face of institutional deterioration that breakdown becomes a possible end stage.

   The foregoing exploration of necessary conditions suggests that prison managers may be able to 'audit' their prison in terms of riot vulnerability, which is a product of administrative and institutional factors (Figure 2). Institutional vulnerability affects the degree of complexity and coupling within the prison organization. Further research will have to show how migration towards increased vulnerability manifests itself in tangible and

		Administrative vulnerability	
		High	Low
Institutional	High	Normal riot	Controlled vulnerability
vulnerability	Low	Blind spot	Safe prison

•Figure 2 **Vulnerability of prison organization to riot**

measurable indicators. One can speak of administrative vulnerability when prison administrators are impartial to, oblivious of, or unprepared for the symptoms of institutional decline. Indicators of administrative vulnerability include leadership turnover, conflicts with policy departments, media exposure, lack of administrative vision (think of Useem and Kimball's [1989: 219] observation about shoddy annual reports) and a lack of crisis management preparations.

When an organization scores high on both dimensions, a riot is, in a certain sense, a 'normal' event. When the organization is well prepared but institutional developments have entered a downward spiral, we can speak of 'controlled vulnerability'. When administrative nearsightedness is not exposed because the institutional structure continues to function well, the organization harbours a 'blind spot' which may come to haunt the prison in the future. A well-run organization in a structurally sound environment is a 'safe prison'.

Our conclusion that riots are system failures inevitably presents a significant challenge to orthodox crisis management in the prison context. Preparation for and response to riots is too often based on the presumption that prisoners can behave badly and rioting is simply at the extreme end of this behavioural dimension. Sequential riots, such as those outlined by Woolf (1991), can be passed off as 'copy-cat' affairs. The problem is actually one of system design and operation – something managers can control.

Riots are an effect, not a cause. That is, prisoners do not riot in furtherance of a 'cause' in a political sense – riots are an effect of the interaction between structural and cultural pathogens. Neither staff nor prisoners design and manage the system; strategic and tactical managers do. Operational managers, such as prison officers, inherit what senior managers provide – consequently, the former cannot be held accountable in the case of a system failure. The explicit acceptance of this premise, as research in other policy sectors shows (Hood and Jones, 1996), increases the potential for organizational resilience in the face of crisis. Some prison managers may find this conclusion unpalatable. Our theoretical framework suggests that prison managers can take significant steps to address both structural and cultural conditions to move their prison out of 'normal riot' vulnerability towards 'safe prison' operation. But, as with all theoretical conclusions, the cultural re-adjustment required may just be too difficult.

Acknowledgement

Notes

1 We adopt Useem and Kimball's (1989: 4) definition: 'A prison riot occurs when the authorities lose control of a significant number of prisoners, in a significant area of the prison, for a significant amount of time.'

2 This pessimistic perspective is well captured by Adams (1994: 195): 'The reality is that riots are brought about in a variety of settings and circumstances and that the task of teasing out and prioritising the factors related to the origins of a particular riot is at best complex and at worst impossible.'

3 Many of the explanatory factors identified in case studies of prison riots can be considered so common that the commission investigating the infamous Attica riot could state, with some authority, that 'Attica is every prison, every prison is Attica.'

4 The classic statement is by Sykes (1958). Consult DiIulio (1991) for an alternative view. It should be noted that the classic sociologist school of prison studies was less concerned with explaining prison riots than with charting the functioning of the 'society of captives' (to borrow Sykes' phrase).

5 Wilsnack (1976: 71) found that 'three-fourths of the prisons with riots had also experienced major administrative changes (in organization or personnel) or prolonged absences of key administrators, combined with public evidence of conflict within the prison staff.'

6 'A relaxed atmosphere in a prison that avoids [. . .] alienation is most important [. . .] to avoid riots' (Fox, 1971: 13).

7 The nature of these external shifts is less important; they may range from a changing Zeitgeist (for instance, longer sentences) to budget declines (Useem and Kimball, 1989; Goldstone and Useem, 1999).

8 A well-functioning organization does not 'lose' its effective routines in a day. The effects of administrative breakdown require time to kick in – allowing plenty of time to identify and remedy the situation.

9 This breakdown in centre-field relations can be caused by several factors, e.g. conflict, confusion and/or political-administrative tension (cf. Lewis, 1997).

10 Useem and Kimball (1989) found that prisoners can perceive a change for the better as further compounding legitimacy problems insofar as this can be tantamount to admitting that there was something wrong and, therefore, if it was wrong yesterday it can still be so today.

11 On the concept of vicious circles, see Masuch (1985).

12 We would like to see more research on the underlying motivations of rioting prisoners. In his work on collective violence, Aya (1990: 53) asserts that 'the motive [for collective violence] lies in, not vague and various social frustrations, but principled disagreements over recognised bones of contention.' At the same time, we know that rioting prisoners rarely articulate tangible demands. For further discussion, see Rattray (1999).

13 We have not discussed the potentially important factor in the escalation of collective violence that prisoner leadership may play. The prisoner population of a prison is notoriously fragmented into various subcultures. It is not uncommon, especially for older staff, to say that 'as long as prisoners fight among themselves they're not fighting us.' Whether they actually manage to articulate demands is less important, but individual leadership may be required to motivate self-centred individuals and

groups towards mutual action – if only for a short period of time, whether coerced or otherwise. It is conventional prison wisdom that when prisoners begin to organize against the system rather than against themselves a noticeable turning point in staff-prisoner relations has been reached.

14 Complexity and coupling are variables; organizations can be more or less complex, tightly or loosely coupled (Rattray, 1999). Well-managed prisons, for instance, with enough resources to develop and maintain organizational slack, may appear loosely coupled with linear interactions (Rison and Wittenberg, 1994). Our theory is based on the insight that 'any system, no matter how loose and linear it may seem, can become tighter and more complex when subject to overload' (Weick, 1993: 191; Rudolph and Repenning, 2002).

15 This is a rather functional definition of crisis management, which does not include crises other than riots. For a more comprehensive approach, consult Rosenthal et al. (2001).

16 The Report of the Woolf Inquiry has been widely accepted as even-handed and perceptive (Player and Jenkins, 1994).

17 Professor King found that staff 'no longer feel identified with their institution let alone the Service' (Woolf, 1991: 338).

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