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I think that I need to say at the outset that my experience of prison is very limited and specialised. I have been a teacher in prison for thirteen years but more realistically I have been in my classroom rather than in the broader community of the prison. Even though I meet men from the whole range of the prison I meet them in a special environment and in small groups. When I have to go on to the wings I meet another reality. There is, however, no other part of my life, which has been like my prison classroom; that set of exchanges and experiences is distinct and different.

I would like to focus here on authority, one of the central, pervading ingredients of my experience of prison. I am subject to authority and I exercise authority. I am equally uncomfortable with both of these positions but occupying them defines my behaviour and my attitudes. The resentment and compliance evident in my students' reactions to authority is dispiriting and so I have set out to avoid it.

In the corner of my classroom there is a bit of electronic kit up on the ceiling. I've no idea what it is but whenever things look like getting out of hand or someone seems to be on the brink of a wild indiscretion I point at it and say to it: 'Have you got that?' Or if I have gone too far in some hysterical denunciation of Capitalism one of the men might say: 'You know this is all being recorded don't you?' It stops our mouths with laughter. It is our way of placing at arm's length the necessary authority of the prison establishment, our way of stating to each other that the establishment's authority is neither welcome nor necessary in our classroom.

Of course authority does come through the door. At the beginning of each morning session two officers come in and, for me at least, there is still the little shock of the uniform. From the men there is a pause, a little bit of watchfulness as I make my routine exchange with the officers. I think that the men are watching me as well as watching the officers. This exchange can set the tone for the first half hour of my lesson. What I regard as a good officer will conduct his/her self in an ordinary way. If there is any information about Movement or appointments, a bit of discussion about any variations on the roll or my incompetence then it will be a normal bit of business as it would be with normal business at the University. All of this, however, might be transformed into a piece of theatre where authority is made plain and asserted. Information is transformed into instruction, discussion into assertive, critical imperatives and a range of formal, challenging behaviour manifested. It might be that the men are the focus of this or it might well be me. Every now and then someone has a go at putting me in my place but for me this is just a piece of public bar argy-bargy and there are never any consequences. For the men there is always a reaction, someone is pressing on a bruise. There are almost always some sorts of consequences for them when they meet with authority and everyone in the exchange knows this.

Whether I like it or not some of this clings to me. The inescapable manifestation of this is that I have a set of keys. I can open the doors that they wish to walk through and if I don't cotton on quickly enough then they have to ask. I always apologise for keeping them waiting, 'Sorry about that old chap,' but there it is. If they want to annoy me they start calling me 'Guv' or 'Boss'. They know that this genuinely upsets me and

that I always rise to it. There is a fundamental contradiction in my position: I am in charge of my room and I think that it is wrong that I should be. I set the agenda (mostly) I tell them what to do (read this, answer that, listen to me) and they do (mostly). This always strikes me as odd. They are not children they are grown men; would I behave with them like this in the pub or over the garden fence? I get away with it because of that part of the authority of the prison institution that clings to me, or because the men see me as a teacher. I get away with it because in almost all of the men there are habits of deference as well as defiance. This though is not enough. I go out of my way to shed authority and even as I do it I know that it is deluded self indulgence. I say to the men: 'you know this is deluded self indulgence don't you?' and they laugh. If someone calls me Guv, I tell them to fuck off. Those words are a way of shedding authority. I deny that I can give a nicking I even deny that I have keys. 'Do what you like,' I say, knowing that they will do what I like.

In most of the groups that I have taught there have been men who were obviously capable of taking the class. I make a habit of deferring to them. Squaddie was two years into his OU degree in philosophy when he walked through my door. He would get started on something and I could easily entice him to the front and go and sit in his chair. He was always good value. Initially, he would get a hearing because of his novelty value, then, because he was competent, he would draw the class in and then he became a status symbol. Here he was a prisoner, doing this, and people would give me meaningful looks and point at him, discreetly, as if to say: see, see, we're not thick. He had authority because he had command. At the moment Casey is always willing to step up. We have a little routine.

'May I have the pen a moment?' the white board marker, and I slip away as he writes up his key sentence and taps the board to get attention. Often something quite interesting happens because he is just a little bit prone to impatience. 'Will you fucking listen?' he says if there is any talking out of turn or, 'You're being thick on purpose, you need to listen to what I'm telling you, this is really important,' if someone does not meet his standards, which are admittedly a lot higher than mine. He is prepared to be much more assertive than I would be. He finds himself being effective because, like Squaddie had, he has command and with this comes stature. I tell myself that I am not an assertive person that I retreat from authority but this not true. I have the habit of giving instructions in that insidious middle class way that teachers have. 'You might be interested in what Hobbes has to say about this on page 63; just listen to this if you will... Or I might recite a poem that I have off by heart (I did it the other day with a bit of Wordsworth) to illustrate a point or say something in French or quote something in Middle English. Not quite showing off, but showing command and certainly having the effect of creating some stature for myself. Stature, command and fear are the ingredients of authority and in my room there is no fear. Sometimes I am taken aback by what the men say to each other. 'Only a cretin would believe in God,' or, equally worryingly, 'Given what we now know about you, Pete, don't you think that aborting you thirty five years ago would have been a morally good act?' But having authority without fear breeds a kind of wild confidence that they assure me would be quite inappropriate back on the wing.

Tony had a history of reacting badly to authority and so of course I made sure to give him plenty of it. He made a wonderful job of things. He could, given his record and talents, easily have exploited fear but what he gave us instead was a sustained and even idealistic explanation of himself. Tony's view is that the main impediment to human happiness, comes from Governments and the sooner all government comes to an end the better.

I've always been a bit bewildered about authority. I think that this is provoked by a distaste for hierarchy. Of course I can see that there might be a strong case for people being compelled to do certain things but the point is that I always want that case to be made rather than have compliance justified by an appeal to rank or status. When I go into the prison I am always aware of entering an arena where authority is expressed as physical power and as hierarchy and as conspiracy. There is the physical power of fences, razor wire and locks, the hierarchies of intelligence and physical prowess, the co-operation which makes daily life possible.

I cannot avoid the physical reality of the prison but I wilfully disregard it and live in the necessary fiction of my classroom. At the moment I have a student who really dislikes being locked up. He always asks me to unlock the classroom door: 'Do you think we could have the door unlocked?' 'Yes, of course,' I say, 'terribly sorry, it's just a habit.' Then there are smiles all round at this silliness. We could glance out of the window and remind ourselves of where we are but we make our choice. Similarly I disregard anyone's physical size, or violent past. I can quite see that this might not be a good idea in other parts of the Prison Estate

but in my classroom it works just fine. As for the hierarchy of intelligence all of us, including me, are only as good as the last thing we said.

Conspiracy, however, is essential.

Everyone knows that the philosophy class is a special place. There is no other place in my life which is anywhere near like it but for the men it is a place which is not in the prison. When they go back to prison they go back to an isolation of a particular kind. An intellectual isolation. A man doing an OU course might well have no-one to talk to for most of the week. At the university I have intellectual conversations which I take for granted about all sorts of things. Even talking about football or the weather might take on a certain tone. You might feel a bit sheepish about this but it's the kind of people we are.

Up on the wing it is not like this. If you are a reader, a thinker, a student then there are long, sometimes barren, vistas of time to be got through on your own. In my classroom I have the authority to make a different kind of space. I exercise this authority without noticing that I do it. In fact I have been provoked into writing this because my students have told me that this is what is going on.

Some of our philosophy lessons are about physics. One of the men is doing a physics degree and he just wants to talk about it. Because it is his field of expertise I had no qualms about handing over to him so that he could tell us about how Aristotle, Gallileo and Einstien had all been thinking about the same problem. Because he was informed, articulate and burning with enthusiasm the authority in the space clustered around him. I was a little bit concerned that there was no philosophy going on and said so. They jumped on me. 'If you weren't here we couldn't have

this kind of conversation. It made me realise that my authority is not, in the main over the men I teach. It is over the prison. I am not pushing in on the men; I am pushing out against the prison. Where does the power to make this push come from? The answer I come to is not one for which I particularly care. I am confident, intellectual and middle class (One step away from being a clever Hooray Henry.) and I am in a context which is, for the most part, ignorant and working class. This is the contrast from which my erratic authority flows. When I stop to think about this I feel awkward, elitist, a snob, but this is how it works.

A few weeks ago a furious row broke out. It was personal, nothing to do with philosophy, one man challenging the behaviour of another. In fact we seemed to be a couple of steps away from something physical. My instinct was to intervene. I almost did but then the part of me which can be objective, which can ignore the shadow of fear and panic, asserted itself. I sat and waited. I withdrew my authority. I glanced at the other members of the group, who were looking at each other and at me and, in that glance, I joined them. I did nothing and, in a silence and a very brief sulk, the moment passed. At break they shook hands. Authority would have disrupted this process. Authority might have given either of them the confidence to escalate the dispute. It would certainly have put an end to philosophy for the morning. As it was my authority could be invested in saying: 'Let's move on and see what Kant has to say about this rather troubling concept of universalisability.' And we did

We make a fiction in which we can live a particular kind of life for a limited period of time. Then I go home or back to the university or the pub or on holiday and the men go back to prison.