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THE 1980 NEW MEXICO PRISON RIOT*

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The 1980 riot at the Penitentiary of New Mexico was the most brutal in U.S. penal history, involving extreme violence and fragmentation among inmates. Yet the prison was not always violent and disorderly. The prison in the early 1970s was relatively calm; after 1975 it became increasingly violent and disorderly. The explanation of this change in the level of disorder is important for understanding the predisposing factors of the riot. This case study of the New Mexico prison offers insights into recent changes in inmate relations, insofar as the history of the New Mexico prison from 1970 to 1980 parallels the general shift in U.S. prisons from inmate solidarity in the late 1960s to increasing violence and fragmentation among inmates during the 1970s.

The riot that began at the Penitentiary of New Mexico in Santa Fe at 1:40 a.m. on February 2, 1980, is without parallel in the penal history of the United States for its brutality, destruction, and disorganization among the rioters. In the 36 hours before order was forcefully restored by the New Mexico State Police and National Guard, 33 inmates were killed by other inmates; 12 were first tortured and mutilated. The exact number of inmates injured during the riot is not known. Serrill and Katel (1980:6) report that as many as 200 inmates were beaten and raped; the New Mexico attorney general reports that at least 90 inmates were treated at local hospitals for overdoses of prison pharmacy drugs and for injuries sustained in fighting among inmates (Office of the Attorney General, 1980a:1). Seven of the 12 correctional officers who were taken hostage were beaten, stabbed, or sodomized, though none were killed. No inmates or hostages were killed or injured during the retaking of the institution by authorities.[1]

Unlike the 1971 inmate revolt at Attica, New York, in which a high degree of inmate organization, solidarity, and political consciousness was evident, the New Mexico riot is notable for the fragmentation, lack of effective leadership, and disorganization apparent among the inmates. As Garson's (1972) historical survey of prison riots makes clear, it is important to place prison disturbances within their historical context. The Attica revolt was the ultimate expression of the politicization and solidarity among inmates in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Atkins and Glick, 1972; Clark, 1973; Jackson, 1970; Pallas and Barber, 1972; Wicker, 1975). The 1980 New Mexico riot revealed the extent to which relations between inmates had become fragmented during the 1970s and early 1980s: political apathy and infighting had replaced the politicization and solidarity of a decade earlier (Abbott, 1981; Cohen *et al.*, 1976; Colvin, 1981; Fox, 1982; Irwin, 1980; Jacobs, 1977; Lieber, 1981; Silberman, 1978; Thomas *et al.*, 1981).

While there were 39 riots in U.S. prisons in the nine years between Attica and New Mexico, the New Mexico riot provides an extreme example of the recent fragmentation evident in U.S. prisons.[2] For this reason, I believe it deserves close study.

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1. For complete descriptions of the riot see Office of the Attorney General (1980a) and Serrill and Katel (1980).

2. This estimate of the number of prison riots is based on accounts in the *New York Times Index* from 1971 through 1979 under the heading "prisons and prisoners" (see also *New York Times*, 1980a). I define a riot as involving fifteen or more inmates who take control of all or part of a prison through force. This excludes

At the time of the Attica revolt, violence was rare among inmates at the Penitentiary of New Mexico, the only maximum and medium security institution for men in the state correctional system.[3] A degree of political solidarity was also evident when the New Mexico inmates staged an "Attica sympathy strike" in October, 1971, that resulted in extensive property damage but did not involve violence among the inmates (*Albuquerque Journal*, 1971a, b; Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:16). Clearly, a drastic change in relations among the New Mexico inmates took place between 1971 and the brutal 1980 riot.

Changes in relations among inmates cannot be understood without exploring the evolution of the entire organizational structure of prisons. Both an official control structure and an inmate social structure contribute to the organization of prisons. The official control structure is comprised of those formal and informal relations of power and authority instituted and maintained by the administration and staff to control inmate behavior. The inmate social structure involves relations of power, status, and economic exchange between inmates (Clemmer, 1940; Davidson, 1974; Sykes, 1958; Sykes and Messinger, 1960). These two structures are closely linked: they can either accommodate or challenge one another. Prisons are relatively calm and orderly when the staff and administration use the cohesive economic and power relationships within the inmate social structure to secure compliance from inmates (Sykes, 1958).

Previous studies of prison riots have focused on the consequences of administrative actions which disrupt the patterns of accommodation and thus disrupt the cohesive forces in the inmate social structure (Fox, 1971; Hartung and Floch, 1956; McCleery, 1968; Ohlin, 1956, 1960; Sykes, 1958). Such administrative actions may result from: (1) the discovery and exposure of "corruption of authority" (Sykes, 1958); (2) policy conflicts between competing interests associated with the prison organization (Jacobs, 1977; Ohlin, 1960); or (3) a change in policies associated with changes in the prison administration (Grusky, 1968; Jacobs, 1977; McCleery, 1968; Wilsnack, 1976). When all three conditions occur simultaneously, the disruption of cohesive forces in the inmate social structure becomes acute and results in a prolonged period of conflict between the administration's control structure and the inmates' social structure. Inmates often organize protests such as strikes to restore the privileges and rights lost with the removal of the accommodations. When a prison administration bows to pressure and grants formal or informal concessions—in effect re-establishing accommodations—order is restored. Sykes (1958) argues that this cycle of conflict and accommodation is normal in prisons.

Sometimes, however, political events and ideological commitments may compel a prison's administration to respond to an organized inmate protest with increased restrictions, coercion, and a "tightening up" of security—all in an attempt to re-establish control (Ohlin, 1956). When this happens, a cycle of increasing inmate disorder and increasing reliance on coercion by the administration may develop. The administration may try to contain the threat of more disturbances through the use of yet more coercion. As the cohesive relations between inmates are steadily

non-violent inmate strikes and inmate fights that do not result in a prison takeover. The Attica revolt was among a wave of prison disturbances from 1968 to 1971 characterized by "increased politicization linked to the various black liberation and other protest movements of the period" (Garson, 1972:546). Judging by accounts in the *New York Times Index*, prison disturbances in U.S. prisons during the remainder of the 1970s were characterized more by fragmentation and violence among inmates than by inmate solidarity or politicization.

3. The Penitentiary of New Mexico, built in 1956 after the old penitentiary was damaged in a 1953 riot, houses both maximum and medium security inmates. The penitentiary is in the "telephone pole" style with a north wing, containing cell blocks for maximum security, a central administrative area, and a south wing, containing dormitories for medium security. I refer to the Penitentiary of New Mexico throughout this paper as "the prison." The prison is the main institution in the state correctional system, housing 90 percent of all inmates. There are three minimum security prison camps at Los Lunas, Sierra Blanca, and Roswell, and two prison facilities for women in Santa Fe and Radium Springs. All of these facilities have been under a centralized department of corrections since 1970.

eroded, it becomes increasingly difficult to re-establish a base upon which accommodations that might restore order can be built. The process is complicated by growing resentment and an escalation of mutual harassment between guards and inmates. With the continuing failure of administrative policies to restore order, a succession of administrators are brought in in a futile search for someone who can "return things to normal." This rapid turnover divides the administration into competing bureaucratic camps and prevents a coordinated and coherent policy of control from emerging. Simultaneously, the inmate social structure fragments into small, self-protective cliques as the cohesive forces between inmates continue to dissolve. If patterns of accommodation are not reinstituted, full-scale rioting eventually erupts. The riot is characterized not by inmate solidarity but by fragmentation and fighting among the inmates. This, I submit, is precisely what happened at New Mexico.

The following case history of the New Mexico riot is based upon insights gathered from 299 interviews with current and former inmates, guards, and officials during the official investigation into the riot ordered by the New Mexico Legislature. I was a principal researcher, analyst, and writer for the investigation, which took eight months to complete. *The Report of the Attorney General on the February 2 and 3, 1980 Riot at the Penitentiary of New Mexico* (Office of the Attorney General, 1980a, b) is composed of two parts: the first part reconstructs the riot itself; the second looks at its causes.[4] This paper also draws upon my contacts and observations while employed by the New Mexico Department of Corrections from 1975 through 1978 as a counselor, college release coordinator, and parole officer at the prison and as a corrections planner in the state's criminal justice planning agency and corrections department central office.

PREDISPOSING FACTORS OF THE NEW MEXICO PRISON RIOT

The 1980 New Mexico riot was preceeded by five years of relative calm followed by five years of increasing disorder. From 1970 to late 1975, there were three successful and three unsuccessful over-the-fence escapes from the prison; from late 1975 to 1980, there were 36 successful and 18 unsuccessful over-the-fence escapes (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:5). Violence between inmates, including fist fights, sexual assaults, and stabbings, was rare at New Mexico in the early 1970s. In the late 1970s, however, inmate violence became commonplace.[5] The reasons for this dramatic change in relations among inmates are the key to understanding the predisposing factors of the riot.

Alternative explanations of growing disorder

Security lapses, poor food and basic services, over-crowding, alleged conspiracies by middle-level administrators, and the emergence of a "new breed" of violent and disruptive inmate were all considered during this case study as possible factors of the riot. If these factors were relevant, their emergence should parallel the shift from order to disorder at the prison. But this, I discovered, was not the case.

1) *Security lapses*: According to correctional staff and inmates, the level and quality of security remained relatively constant during the two periods of order and disorder. Security lapses such as open doors and grills, which allowed the riot to spread, were so common over the previous 10 years that guards described them as virtually "standard operating procedures" (Office of the At-

4. These reports can be obtained from the Office of the Attorney General, P.O. Drawer 1508, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 87501.

5. Exact figures on the number of violent incidents are unavailable because all inmate records were destroyed in the riot. The assertion of increasing violence after 1975 is based primarily on interviews with inmates and staff. Press reports (*Albuquerque Journal*, 1977b, c, 1978b, c, 1979a, b,c, 1980a, c; *New Mexican*, 1976d; *New York Times*, 1980b) and minutes of the New Mexico Corrections Commission hearings (Department of Corrections, 1980b) also corroborate the trend toward disorder.

torney General, 1980b:10). The ratio of guards to inmates was unchanged during the two periods. Measures designed to tighten security were actually instituted in 1976, including formal training programs, a pass system to control inmate movement, and the placing of concertina wire on perimeter fences. None of these measures curtailed the sharp increase in violence and escapes. A relaxation in security does not seem to have occurred and, therefore, is not a plausible explanation for growing disorder.

2) *Food and services*: The inmates found the food and other basic services equally unsatisfactory during the periods of order and disorder (*Albuquerque Journal*, 1972d; 1980b). Some services, such as medical care, reportedly improved in the latter period, while others such as recreation, deteriorated. (Going to the yard or gym, it should be noted, became increasingly dangerous in the late 1970s).

3) *Overcrowding*: The inmate population fluctuated during the two periods of order and disorder. Designed to hold 950 inmates, the prison housed 1,272 inmates at one point in 1978. Yet the highest population in the prison's history, 1,294, was recorded in 1963 with no increase in disorder. In 1979, the year before the riot, the population stayed near the capacity figure of 950. In the 18 months following the riot, the population remained near an all-time low of 700 while six inmates and two guards were murdered—the highest rates in the prison's history apart from the riot itself (*Corrections Magazine* 1980, 1981; *Rocky Mountain News*, 1982). Garson (1972:551) also found little relationship between prison overcrowding and rioting. However, overcrowding cannot be completely discounted as a contributing factor of the New Mexico riot: it exacerbated other trends, especially in the three months prior to the riot, when inmate population suddenly increased by 200.

4) *Conspiracies*: Another possible factor, popular with some journalists (eg., Morris, 1981) was the presence of an entrenched administrative clique alleged to have been conspiring in corruption, brutality, arbitrary discipline, and cover-ups. This argument infers that growing disorder and, eventually, the riot were a *direct* result of this group's miscreant behavior. However, the press reported allegations of brutality in both periods (*Albuquerque Journal*, 1972b, c,d, 1980d, e); and corruption associated with heroin trafficking was more pronounced in the early 1970s when the prison was relatively calm (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:17). In addition, the administrative clique, whose most important members were Warden Felix Rodriguez and Deputy Warden Horatio Herrera, also had greater power in the prison organization in the early 1970s (*Albuquerque Journal*, 1972a). In 1975, these two officials were respectively transferred and fired from the prison by order of Governor Jerry Apodaca in the wake of allegations of misconduct made by New Mexico Attorney General Toney Anaya (*The New Mexican*, 1975a, b; Office of the Attorney General, 1975). The 1975 attorney general's investigation of the prison coincided with a political dispute over promotions at the prison between this administrative clique and Governor Apodaca, who after taking office in 1975 initiated a massive reorganization of the corrections system (Hart, 1976). Attorney General Anaya's allegations were never proven, but the subsequent actions by Governor Apodaca significantly curtailed the power of this administrative clique. The period of disorder in the late 1970s saw this and other administrative cliques in greater disarray, not in greater control or influence over events at the prison. Thus, the "conspiracy" explanation is contradicted by the level of disorder itself.

5) *"New breed" theory*: Some New Mexico correctional administrators argued that a "new breed" of violent, disruptive, and aggressive inmate was to blame for the riot. These inmates were described in interviews and conversations with me as "psychopathic personality types;" a few administrators even spoke of them as a new "genetic type" with violent propensities. These allegedly hard-to-control inmates were said to have begun entering the prison around 1975 and 1976. But this argument is weakened by the fact that crimes for which inmates were sent to the New Mexico prison became proportionately less violent as the prison itself became more violent. In 1970, 45

percent of all crimes for which New Mexico prisoners were convicted were violent crimes. By 1975, the figure had dropped to 38 percent, and by 1979 it was 33 percent[6] (Department of Corrections, 1971, 1976, 1980a). In addition, inmate leaders who, in the early 1970s, helped maintain order (the "old breed") were almost all in prison for violent crimes (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:29). Other studies also indicate a lack of correlation between prison violence and the entry of "violence-prone" inmates into prisons (Bennett, 1976:151; Ellis *et al.*, 1974:38; Garson, 1972:551; Jacobs, 1977:160).

These facts suggest that the so-called "new breed" is better understood as a product of internal changes within the prison itself. While a new type of inmate who behaved more violently was certainly emerging in the late 1970s, this fact alone does not adequately explain the long-term build-up to the riot. The emergence of the "new breed" itself needs to be explained. How the "new breed" was produced by the changing control structure and inmate social structure is the key to explaining the New Mexico riot.

Structure of control and the inmate social structure: 1970–1975

The structure of control in the early 1970s was vastly different than that of the late 1970s. During the period of relative order inmate power was accommodated by the administration. Strong inmates were induced into maintaining order because their sources of power over other inmates were connected to formally established programs and informally tolerated drug trafficking.

Two powerful groups of inmates emerged. The first group included the inmate administrators of several programs initiated in 1968. These included a college program through the College of Santa Fe, a computer key punch shop, a "college prep" program (Project Newgate), an adult basic education program, and several "outside contact" programs. The inmate administrators formally and informally influenced the staff's selection of other inmates for participation in the programs. Participation in these programs greatly enhanced chances of parole; thus, the inmate administrators held considerable power. The inmate administrators were an important element of "self-policing" within the inmate society (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:15). They had a strong self-interest in maintaining order to protect programs and, consequently, their sources of power. Most of the inmate leaders associated with programs had entered prison with convictions for violent crimes, but they exercised power non-violently.

A second group of inmates controlled trafficking of heroin and other drugs within the prison. Drug consumption increased dramatically at New Mexico from about 1971 to 1976, as did the number of inmate sub-groups involved in trafficking (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:17). The toleration of, and in some cases collusion with, drug trafficking by prison staff members became an important feature of accommodation and the growing "corruption of authority" during the early 1970s. The need to protect drug rackets indirectly helped maintain order since disruptions might jeopardize drug connections and "bring the heat down" upon the traffickers.

That order was maintained from 1970 to 1975 is reflected in the low level of escapes and violence, the large number of "voluntary" (unsolicited) informants, and the fact that less than five

6. Included as violent crimes are homicides, kidnappings, rapes, assaults, and armed robberies. It should be stressed that this figure refers to crimes and not individuals. In addition, these figures refer to all New Mexico prisoners, including those in minimum security camps. The minimum security camps housed about 10 percent of all prisoners throughout the ten-year period, and were filled only through transfer from the prison. The opening of the Roswell Camp in 1979 conceivably could have lowered the number of inmates with non-violent offenses in the prison. However, violent offenders, with the exception of sex offenders, were not excluded from transfers to minimum security camps. In addition, the trend toward less violent offenses was evident prior to the opening of Roswell, averaging 43 percent between 1970 and 1975 and 37 percent between 1975 and 1978 (Department of Corrections, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979; Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:E1).

percent of the inmate population was in solitary confinement[7] (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:18). All of these factors were associated with formal and informal incentive controls. Inmates controlled other inmates non-violently, using the power connected with drug trafficking and inmate programs. Violence, while always potentially available, was rarely used. Inmate power was accommodated by the administration directly through programs and indirectly through tolerance of illegal activities.

Structure of control and the inmate social structure: 1975–1980

In late 1975, the control structure at the prison underwent a dramatic change which disrupted the non-violent relations within the inmate society. The deputy warden was fired and the warden was transferred out of the prison to a "do-nothing" job in central office after New Mexico Attorney General Anaya accused them of mismanagement and corruption. In a report to Governor Apodaca, Attorney General Anaya said "the free flow of contraband drugs into the penitentiary is at an alarming level" (Office of the Attorney General, 1975:3). In October, 1975, Governor Apodaca appointed a new prison administration which supported a stricter custodial philosophy. Four other key members of the old administration, including the chief of security and the former warden's administrative assistant, were soon transferred out of the prison. The new administration, composed largely of administrators from out of state, was concerned about drug trafficking and disapproved of inmates having what they saw as unchecked power over the prison. Most of the guards welcomed the new administration's philosophy and agreed with Deputy Warden Clyde Malley, one of the new administrators, that "the inmates were running the place" (*The New Mexican*, 1976a:A1).

In an attempt to wrest control of the prison from the inmates, the new administration removed all inmates from administrative positions in programs, tightened restrictions on inmate movement, stopped "outside contact" programs, increased drug searches, and clamped down on possible conduits for drugs. The curtailment of drugs and many programs removed the major informal and formal incentive controls over inmates, removed important illegitimate and legitimate opportunity structures within the inmate society and, thus, disrupted important sources of inmate power that had been connected to these incentives.

The removal of incentive controls, necessitated by the exposure and public criticism of the former administration's practices, constituted a disruption of the previous accommodation between staff and inmates. Organized protests from inmates quickly erupted. In June, 1976, the inmates organized and staged a work strike to protest the new administration's changes. Six hundred of the prison's 912 inmates participated in the strike (*Albuquerque Journal*, 1976a; *The New Mexican*, 1976a). Given the administration's ideological commitment to tighter custodial policies, public criticism of the former administration, continuing media interest in the prison, and the need for the new administration to establish its credibility with a guard force that resented the power inmates had gained, the administration felt it could not grant any concessions to the strikers. Instead, force was used to end the strike. According to inmates and some staff, tear gas was thrown into housing units and strikers were forced to run a gauntlet of staff members wielding ax handles (*The New Mexican*, 1976b, c; Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:20). As one correctional officer told me during an interview: "We were finally showing them who was in charge." Organized inmate opposition was thus suppressed. Alleged leaders of the strike were placed in solitary confinement; some were transferred out of state.

The breaking of the strike inaugurated a new era, characterized by a greater reliance by the administration on more coercive control measures. The removal of incentives associated with the previous administration reduced the number of "voluntary" inmate informants and forced staff

7. Solitary confinement includes both disciplinary and protective custody cases.

members (under pressure from supervisors to obtain information) to rely increasingly on direct solicitation of information through threats and promises. The coercive "snitch game" included such tactics as threatening to label an inmate a "snitch" in front of other inmates if the inmate refused to inform (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:24).

The increased use of solitary confinement further escalated coercion. The percentage of New Mexico inmates in solitary confinement increased from five percent in the early 1970s, when there was no designated protective custody unit, to over 20 percent for much of the late 1970s. In 1976, Cell Block 4, designed to hold 90 inmates, was designated for protective custody. It held as many as 212 inmates in 1978 (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:27). Use of disciplinary segregation, the most severe *legal* sanction, also increased dramatically. Population in disciplinary segregation, Cell Block 3, designed to hold 86, rose from an average of about 50 in the early 1970s to an average of about 150 for most of the late 1970s. In 1978, it held a record 200 inmates (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:27).

In late 1977, two inmates in disciplinary segregation—both of whom were among the alleged leaders of the June, 1976 work strike—filed on behalf of several other inmates a class-action suit in federal court against the State of New Mexico, seeking an improvement in conditions at the prison (*Albuquerque Journal*, 1980b; Serrill and Katel, 1980:16). This suit and its subsequent negotiations, which dragged on until after the riot, represented the last effort at collective opposition to the administration by inmates.

The increased use of coercive controls became inevitable after formal and informal incentives were removed in late 1975 and 1976. This alteration in the structure of control had a devastating impact upon the inmate social structure. The removal of incentives disrupted inmate sources of non-violent power, and the segregation and transfer of many inmate leaders implicated in the 1976 strike removed the agents of political cohesion from the inmate social structure. A power vacuum developed, triggering a struggle for power among the inmates. Power became increasingly based on violence as alternative sources of non-violent power diminished. Those inmates who could establish a reputation for violence had the best chance of gaining power. But the self-interest of these inmates became associated with disorder, which further enhanced their violent reputations, and not collective protest.

The competition to establish a violent reputation in turn generated more violence. Inmates found that a willingness and ability to engage in violence was the best protection against other inmates. A reputation for violence became a necessary requisite for survival—and especially for protection from sexual assault—in the late 1970s. The only alternatives were submission or seeking the protection of officials; these two alternatives, most inmates agreed, contained worse consequences than fighting and forming self-protection cliques with other inmates (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:28).

Some staff members and inmates have inferred that inmates who were caught up in this violent competition began to develop an ideology of "moral weakness versus moral strength," based on the "will" to engage in violence, confront guards, and "tough it out" in disciplinary segregation. These inmates, estimated to number about 75 by 1979, set the direction of the inmate society in the late 1970s. These inmates were *not* a cohesive group, but constituted several uncoordinated and unstable cliques, each composed of a few inmates.[8] The most notorious of these cliques revolved around three inmates convicted of a 1978 baseball bat murder of another inmate suspected of being an informant (Serrill and Katel, 1980:21). Most of the inmates in these cliques

8. Some of these inmates tried to model themselves after members of California prison gangs, known as the Aryan Brotherhood and La Nuestra Familia (Irwin, 1980). But this level of gang organization, observed in California prisons, did not exist at New Mexico.

lived in a single cell block, number 5, and spent their prison careers "going between Cellblock 5 and (segregation) Cellblock 3" (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:30).

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that New Mexico prison administrators began to notice, about 1976, a "new breed" of violent and disruptive inmate emerging in the New Mexico prison. Clearly a sociological phenomenon, the "new breed" becomes inexplicable only when viewed primarily as a psychological or supposedly "genetic" aberration.

Cloward (1960:45) connects the emergence of a similar disruptive inmate role (known as the "hero," "martyr," or "screwball" in correctional literature) with the differential opportunity structure of prisions. He argues that violent, disruptive inmates are engendered through failure to establish themselves in either the legitimate or illegitimate opportunity structures within prisons, and ultimately become "double failures."

Applying Cloward's argument to New Mexico, the change in the prison's control structure in 1975 and 1976 dramatically altered the legitimate and illegitimate opportunity structures upon which non-violent inmate power had been based. Removal of legitimate (program) and illegitimate (drug trafficking) opportunities in the prison created a new opportunity structure that produced the "hero" or "new breed" role. A self-reinforcing structure of violent competition emerged which further incited inmate violence. Rather than being explained by a lack of structure, as implied in McCleery's (1968) theory of prison disorder as a "Hobbesian state of nature," growing violence and disorder are better understood as responses to a new set of structural imperatives.

With these changes in the organizational structure at the New Mexico prison, inmate society became increasingly fragmented into small and unstable self-protection cliques. While most cliques were racially segregated, they were not organized around race or ethnicity. Many cliques of similar ethnic composition vied with each other as well as with cliques and individuals of different races. Violence between inmates was reported by staff and inmates to be both inter- and intra-racial, with no apparent pattern (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:8). Nor was race an apparent factor in the killings during the riot, though one brief racial confrontation between blacks and Chicanos occurred on the prison yard that resulted in no injuries (Office of the Attorney General, 1980a:49; Serrill and Katel, 1980:20). Racial tension, especially between blacks and Chicanos, had existed at New Mexico for at least 10 years prior to the riot.[9] The disorder and fragmentation certainly added to racial tension in the prison, but were not caused by it.

A more important factor in this fragmentation was the coercive pattern of communication (the "snitch game") between staff and inmates which created a growing class of solicited informants and thus convenient and (from the perspective of most inmates) legitimate targets for those seeking a reputation for violence. The coercive tactics for gaining information (and carelessness by staff members in protecting identities of informants) contributed to a growing isolation and mutual suspicion among inmates. Suspected informants were a major target for violence during the riot (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:25). They were attacked, not apparently for reasons of personal animosity, but because they were vulnerable and because their death or injury was unlikely to invoke revenge from other inmates. By the late 1970s, any basis for solidarity between inmates had dissolved.

Fragmentation of the corrections administration

While the New Mexico inmate society was fragmenting in the late 1970s, the administration of the prison and the state corrections department was becoming increasingly disorganized as a result of the steady turnover in administrators. One warden and one secretary of corrections had

9. One of the few violent confrontations between inmates in the early 1970s involved the throwing of aluminum food trays and a fist fight between black and Chicano inmates (*Albuquerque Journal*, 1972e).

administered the prison from 1970 to 1975, but after the 1975 shake-up, the prison went through four wardens and four secretaries. The first change of administrators followed the 1975 attorney general's investigation. Subsequent changes were in part responses to increasing inmate disorder and growing policy disputes between a liberal-minded secretary of corrections, Charles Becknell, and a hard-line prison warden, Clyde Malley (*Albuquerque Journal*, 1977a, 1978a). These disputes occurred in the context of a massive reorganization of the state's corrections department launched by Governor Apodaca in 1975. In 1979, Apodaca was succeeded by Bruce King, who did not pursue the reorganization. In fact, Governor King in 1979 named former warden Felix Rodriguez, ousted by Apodaca in 1975, as a division director overseeing the prison and other adult institutions; however, he retained Apodaca's department secretary, Charles Becknell (*Santa Fe Reporter*, 1979). At this point, the administration of the corrections department split into several feuding, bureaucratic camps.[10]

The rapid administrative turnover and resulting confusion in policies contributed to the growing disorder at the prison that left both guards and inmates in a state of uncertainty. Guards complained of arbitrary and confused directives from supervisors; inmates complained of arbitrary and conflicting orders from guards. "Mutual harassment" between guards and inmates increased, and the turnover rate for guards at the prison doubled in the late 1970s (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:21).

The control structure at New Mexico in the late 1970s mirrored the inmate social structure: both depended upon coercion and resulted in fragmentation into cliques. These gradual structural changes within the organization set the stage for the riot.

PRECIPITATING FACTORS OF THE NEW MEXICO PRISON RIOT

Seven events hastened the disintegration of order that finally culminated in the riot:

1) A new warden, the fourth since 1975, began removing inmates from segregation in June 1979, as part of an attempt to receive accreditation for the prison from the American Correctional Association.[11] This brought the unit down to a near capacity population prior to the riot, but the easing of segregation policies without a concurrent increase in positive incentives and other controls removed a level of containment by placing many of the "new breed" inmates in the general prison population. It also transferred overcrowding from cell blocks to less secure dormitories (Office of the Attorney General, 1980a:C3). This decision betrayed the lack of a coherent or coordinated policy of inmate management, characteristic of the administration's confusion in 1979.

2) The administration eliminated one of the last remaining formal incentives, transfer to a minimum security prison, in November 1979, after an inmate killed another inmate during an escape at Camp Sierra Blanca (*Albuquerque Journal*, 1979d). Not only did the halt in transfers remove an important formal incentive for maintaining order, but it also raised the inmate population from a near capacity of 957 in November 1979, to 1,157 at the time of the riot.

3) Inmates became frustrated in late 1979 when federal court orders to improve conditions at the prison, a response to the inmates' 1977 class action suit, were sporadically implemented or ignored by administrators (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:31). Major issues of the suit had become bogged down in negotiations. Growing frustration with the legal process prompted one inmate plaintiff to tell his lawyer in late November 1979 that he did not know how much longer he could "keep the heavies in line" (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:31). The inmates

10. See Colvin (1981) for details of this bureaucratic conflict and the political and historical context in which it occurred.

11. The American Correctional Association standards call for one man per cell (Gettinger, 1982).

associated with the law suit were clearly losing the struggle to keep alive a collective, non-violent response to the administration's policies.[12]

4) Cell Block 5, which housed the so-called "new breed" inmates, was closed for renovation in November 1979. Most of these inmates were transferred to a less secure dormitory, E-2. This removed yet another level of containment within the prison. The decision to close Cell Block 5 was made despite warnings and misgivings of caseworkers which were apparently never communicated to those in charge. Three months later, the riot began—in Dormitory E-2.

5) On December 9, 1979, 11 inmates escaped. Most were identified as belonging to the violent "new breed" cliques. Though all but one were captured and placed in Cell Block 3 prior to the riot, a sudden increase in searches and restrictions on movement heightened inmate frustration.

6) While the security lapses that allowed inmates to take over the prison had been commonplace for at least 10 years, an important change in a security apparatus occurred in mid-January, 1980. Bullet-proof glass was installed in the control center, replacing steel bars which had blocked visibility from the control center into the main corridor. The control center houses keys and controls access to the entire prison. Security personnel expressed their fears about the vulnerability of the glass to their supervisors. These fears were apparently never communicated to administrators in charge of renovations. On the morning of the riot, inmates quickly broke through the glass, allowing them to spread the riot through the entire prison.

7) There were a number of forewarnings that a major disturbance was imminent (Office of the Attorney General, 1980a:14; Serrill and Katel, 1980:8). On January 31, 1980, an intelligence meeting was held in the warden's office. Officials discussed rumors of escapes and a possible hostage taking. Dormitory E-2 was pinpointed as a possible trouble area. These forewarnings, however, were mixed in with a plethora of other rumors about disturbances. Officials had no way to distinguish reliable from unreliable intelligence, a legacy of the coercive "snitch game" which often resulted in inmates telling officials anything to escape punishment. The forewarnings about a possible disturbance in Dormitory E-2 were unknown to officers and their supervisors who were on duty the morning of the riot (Office of the Attorney General, 1980a:15).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RIOT

At 1:40 a.m. on February 2, 1980, several so-called "new breed" inmates in Dormitory E-2 overpowered four guards after hasty planning and several drinks of home-made alcohol. The inmates quickly captured guards stationed at other dormitories in the south wing of the prison. Without any apparent plan, the inmates took over the prison, improvising as they stumbled upon an open dormitory door, an open security grill separating the south wing from the rest of the prison, the glass in the control center, and blow torches left behind by renovation crews.

A group of inmates, allegedly led by one of the inmates from Dormitory E-2, proceeded to the north wing of the prison and opened Cell Block 3 with keys seized from the control center, freeing what were considered to be the most disruptive inmates in the prison. Keys to the protective custody unit, Cell Block 4, were lost during the seige of the control center, but blow torches were used to cut through doors and gain access to vulnerable inmates.

Seventeen of the 33 inmates killed were housed in Cell Block 3 and Cell Block 4. Twelve of these inmates were tortured with blow torches, set afire, and mutilated; one was beheaded with a shovel. The victims included suspected "snitches," a child rapist, and "mentally disturbed" inmates whose screaming had kept other inmates in segregation awake at night. There does not

12. The law suit, which was handled by the American Civil Liberties Union, was finally settled five months after the riot. The State of New Mexico consented to each of the issues prior to an actual ruling from the federal court. A monitor, Daniel R. Cron, was appointed to oversee implementation of federal court orders arising from the suit. In May 1981, Cron cited the corrections department with "across the board disobedience of the standards mandated for maximum security inmates" (*Denver Post*, 1981:8).

seem to have been any motive for these uncoordinated killings beyond the fact that the victims were vulnerable inmates whose deaths would not be revenged. Killings occurred in other parts of the prison too. Some involved suspected inmate informants; others resulted from fights started during the riot. Some had no apparent motive.[13]

> There was no clear inmate leadership during the riot; inmates were divided into small groups committing crimes, competing for control, or fighting to escape the mayhem (Office of the Attorney General, 1980b:7).

During the riot, inmates involved in the class action suit made a futile attempt to organize the disturbance into a collective protest. They presented a list of demands to the prison administration and attempted to gather hostages in one place for effective negotiation. Their small band of followers were unable to pry hostages away from inmates until near the end of the riot, when two hostages who had been badly beaten were handed over to these inmates for release. The prison administration tried through radio communication to stay in contact with this particular group of inmates in the faint hope of releasing hostages through negotiation and ending the riot. But only two of the 12 hostages were released through negotiation—one in exchange for allowing a TV cameraman into the prison; the other for a promise of transfers out of state for certain inmates. This group never really controlled the hostages, however, and radio communication with the prison administration was constantly interrupted by other inmates who used walkie-talkies to contradict the negotiating inmates (Serrill and Katel, 1980:11). The "negotiations" had practically no impact on the outcome of the riot. There was simply no cohesive group of inmates with whom the administration could realistically negotiate.

Most of the hostages were released sporadically by the various groups who held them; a few actually escaped during the mayhem. Thirty-six hours after the riot began it exhausted itself. Barbiturates, stolen from the prison pharmacy and ingested by hundreds of inmates, are cited as one factor for the deceleration of the riot (Office of the Attorney General, 1980a:25; Serrill and Katel, 180:14). An anti-climactic armed assault on the prison officially ended the riot, but no resistance was offered by any of the inmates.

The riot itself was clearly distinguished by three characteristics which reflect changes in the control structure and inmate social structure of the preceeding five years. These characteristics are:

1) The rapid and spontaneous takeover of the prison by inmates associated with the violent "new breed" cliques produced by structural changes within the prison organization.

2) The most extreme and apparently uncoordinated brutality by inmates in U.S. penal history. The riot was clearly an occasion to enhance or build reputations for violence and represents an escalation of the relations that had evolved in the inmate social structure prior to the riot. The building of a reputation for violence as the prevalent source of inmate power involved not just a quantitative competition (how many you kill) but also a qualitative competition (how you kill) that engendered the extremes of torture and humiliation during the riot.

3) Fragmentation and a lack of solidarity among inmates that contrasts starkly with the 1971 Attica uprising and previous inmate rebellions at New Mexico in 1971 and 1976.

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13. We will never know with certainty the facts surrounding many of these murders. Of the 33 murders, only 14 resulted in indictments (*The Champion*, 1982). The attorney general's inquiry was not a criminal investigation and did not try to establish individuals' guilt. However, hundreds of interviews conducted by the New Mexico State Police for criminal investigation during and immediately after the riot suggest that members of the violent, "new breed" cliques were involved in the killings. While the official investigation had access to those police interviews, it made no attempt to test the allegations made against specific inmates. It is entirely possible (and well within the theory I have developed in this paper) that inmates who had never previously engaged in violence committed murder during the riot.

CONCLUSION

Prison riots open to view the grim realities that underlie the U.S. penal system. Foucault (1977) argues that the "failure" of prisons is actually a "success" in terms of cementing class relations in U.S. society by fragmenting the underclass through mutual fear and victimization. The New Mexico case study parallels the depoliticization and growing fragmentation among members of the underclass in the United States during the 1970s (Piven and Cloward, 1979; Wolfe, 1977). The case study shows how social control measures can create violence among the underclass by undermining its political cohesion (Marx, 1981; Poulantzas, 1978; Therborn, 1978).

Clearly, prisons have failed to provide public protection, deterrence, and rehabilitation. Ultimately, the prison must be phased out as a form of punishment and be replaced with effective community-based alternatives that include neighborhood and client control of the rehabilitation process (Nagel, 1977). For this to occur, the class structure, which depends on the prison for social control, must be altered (Colvin, 1981; Jankovic, 1977; Melossi, 1976; Rusche and Kirchheimer, 1939; Wallace, 1981).

In the meantime, positive steps toward reform must be initiated. Thomas *et al.* (1981) offer six strategies to alleviate the current crisis in prisons:

1) Redirect funding toward viable rehabilitation and create positive incentives for inmates to organize themselves around mutually beneficial and non-violent activities.

2) Expand existing citizen prison committees, such as the Fortune Society and the American Civil Liberties Union, to provide monitoring and publicizing of prison conditions.

3) Reform the organizational structure of prisons to enhance the flexibility of administrative policies, remove the rigid hierarchical division of labor, and improve accountability of line personnel. These steps will require an administrative structure that seeks input from, and is responsive to, both inmates and line staff.

4) Seek legislative reforms that shorten prison sentences, remove discriminatory sentencing practices, and remove the prison from disputes between state politicians.

5) Enhance political collectivism among inmates through education and political self-development.

6) Focus research on the *empirical* problems in prisons; move away from mere theoretical speculation and political rhetoric; but at the same time oppose the concern with control of the underclass, characteristic of much conventional criminal justice research.

None of these steps will be successful without an informed public that is ready to form political alliances with the other victims of our current penal system: the inmates and the guards. We cannot wait for more prison riots like New Mexico to awaken us from our complacency.

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