

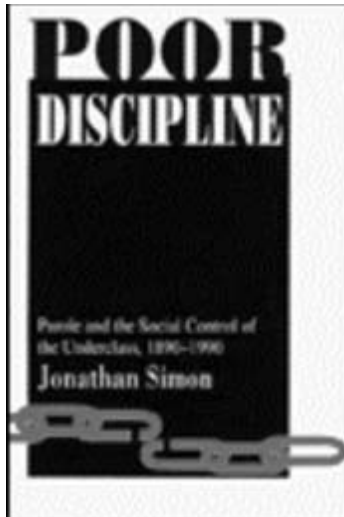


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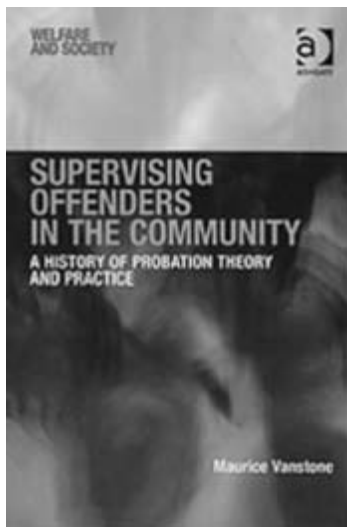
Poor Discipline: Parole and the Social Control of the Underclass 1890–1990

Jonathan Simon

University of Chicago Press; 1993; pp 286;

£17.50, pbk

ISBN: 978-0-22675-857-5



Supervising Offenders in the Community: A History of Probation Theory and Practice

Maurice Vanstone

Ashgate; 2004; pp 198; £19.99, pbk

ISBN 978-0-75467-174-9

These two books are not particularly new, so reviewing them now and reviewing them together requires some explanation. Their currency, of course, derives partly from the many recent efforts to make sense of probation's history in the light of its recent UK centenary. Within the pantheon of established and emerging scholarship on probation and parole history, these books deserve to be specially celebrated. Reviewing them together is partly an accidental result of my reading them back-to-back, but for reasons that will become obvious it makes good sense to do so.

In some respects, these are quite different books. Simon uses California's parole system as the case study through which he tries to make sense of the changing nature of penalty in the century leading up to 1990. What he produces is as rich, compelling and insightful an analytical or historical sociology of 'corrections' as I have read. Although Vanstone draws on some common theoretical strands and frequently connects the development of probation with its changing social context, his history is quite different in tone and focus. Where Simon's book is at its best in analysing the social significance of correctional policy and practice, Vanstone's strengths lie in its rich and vivid descriptions of how different generations of probation's advocates have accounted for, defended and advanced its practices and its influence.

Despite these differences in emphasis, both studies are based on similar methodologies, combining a close reading of historical records and sources with interviews with practitioners of various eras. To examine the practices of the early 1990s, Simon's study also draws on one year of participant observation in parole offices in San Francisco and Los Angeles and on quantitative analysis of case files on 275 parolees.

Simon's book is divided into three parts. The first of these deals with 'Parole as Normalization' in three chapters. The first provides fascinating insights into a series of historical practices dating back to the Middle Ages that involved the provision of sureties for good behaviour linked to forms of family or community surveillance of and accountability for offenders in lieu of punishment. Chapter 2 reveals how the emergence of the prison in the modern period was linked to the development of a model of industrial discipline which, for a variety of reasons, eventually moved beyond the prison walls and into the community through the emergence of parole. In Chapter 3, Simon argues that as the reliance on family, on community and on work itself to discipline the parolee waned during and after the Great Depression, so the clinical approach emerged. This approach 'allowed the norms of industrialised society, translated into psychological conditions, to be extended by a professionalized correctional apparatus to those increasingly outside the reach of the industrial labor market' (p. 16). In linking the rise of the influence of the 'psy' disciplines with the decline in opportunities for reformation through work, Simon brilliantly elucidates the processes by which penal practices reflect, adapt and develop new discursive resources so as to revise and re-legitimate their established roles and functions.

The second part of Simon's book explores a further shift in the nature of parole; this time from the normalization of offenders (whether through work or treatment) to their management. He relates this reconfiguration not just to the usual analysis of the influence of 'nothing works', but also to wider social and economic developments that progressively undermined a much wider range of forms of social service during the 1970s and 1980s. The critical questions he addresses in Chapters 4–6 concern how and why parole survived the demise of its normalizing programme – and indeed why it has expanded through the development of bureaucratic and managerial systems and the process of 'technocratic rationalization'; a process characterized by the decline of professional autonomy and the rise of standardized procedures and practices deemed more efficient. Part 3 of 'Poor Discipline' reveals the dire consequences of this managerialization. As Simon puts it:

Here is the irony of this tale. Parole, which once operated as a mechanism to control prison inmates with the promise of early release and ultimately relinking them to the social discipline of the community, now functions as a mechanism to secure the borders of communities without social discipline by channelling its least stable members back to prison. Rather than functioning as a 'surety' for the disreputable, parole functions as a lower cost system of incarceration for a population that is increasingly defined as inherently, irredeemably dangerous. (p. 203)

In the week (as I write) of Barack Obama inauguration as US President, it is telling that Simon's conclusion in 1993 was that California (and the USA) had to choose between strategies of 'waste management' in corrections or 'enrichment'. The latter option prefigures more recent developments around Justice Reinvestment (a topic currently receiving welcome attention from the House of Commons Justice Committee). Simon's final few paragraphs explore 'Choosing Between a New Reconstruction and a New Civil War'. Perhaps 15 years on from its publication, Obama's inaugural speech writers have been listening.

Vanstone's book tells the story of probation in England and Wales and in its telling there are many intriguing echoes of Simon's themes – as well as some direct focus on the influence of American ideas and practices on UK probation. 'Supervising Offenders in the Community' has been rightly praised and is probably best known for providing the most carefully researched and thoughtfully argued revision of the traditional histories of probation that are the focus of his first chapter. Chapters 2 and 3 reconsider the origins and early development of the service – confronting head-on early probation's dubious relationships with the eugenics movement, as well as critically re-examining its more widely known (if not well understood) connections with both Christianity and the emerging 'psy' disciplines. Chapters 4 and 5 excel in providing equally fascinating and detailed accounts of the development and influence of casework (also a recurring theme of Simon's book) between the 1920s and 1960s. These chapters draw heavily on articles published in this journal to examine how social scientists, penal reformers and probation staff offered sometimes subtly different interpretations of the causes of crime and its remedies. Vanstone goes much further than any of his predecessors in examining these discourses of theory and practice – and is commendably sensitive throughout to the potential dissonances between official accounts of probation and the realities of frontline practice, particularly under the familiar weight of high caseloads and limited resources.

'Supervising Offenders in the Community' is perhaps marginally less compelling in its account of probation since the 1970s in Chapters 6–8. This may simply be the result of the greater familiarity of this part of the

story and of the wider range of sources and thus interpretations available. That said, assuming considerable knowledge in the reader is a recurring problem in this section; for example, there are several references to the Non-Treatment Paradigm and the IMPACT study, but these important sources are not described or analysed in detail. More generally, Vanstone's book would perhaps have been further strengthened if it had followed Simon's example in repeatedly summarizing and thus gathering the many strands of the analysis. His too-short final chapter succeeds in doing this to a limited degree – although his comments on the balances and tensions between faith (whether in God or in theory) and evidence of effectiveness in the history of probation are as well observed, as are his final remarks about probation's relentless and perennially unresolved pursuit of professional status and credibility.

Like Simon, Vanstone ends with some comments on contemporary challenges for probation; in his case he stresses the risk that its absorption into NOMS might undermine the humanitarianism that has been at its heart for the last 100 years. It is in this regard that UK readers would be well rewarded by reading or rereading Simon's study. His discussion in Chapter 4 of the 'New Model' of parole supervision (developed in California in the early 1970s) will send a shiver of apprehension through both detractors and advocates of the National Offender Management Model – the story of the New Model's failure is a salutary one, in part because of what it reveals about the unintended consequences of stripping out and devaluing the human and affective aspects of supervision; aspects that are consistently and critically at the core of Vanstone's book. For these reasons and many others, I commend both of these books to the widest possible readership. They may not be new titles, but they could hardly be more relevant to contemporary issues and debates.

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