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Fragile Moralities and Dangerous Sexualities

Alana Barton: Fragile Moralities and Dangerous Sexualities. Two Centuries of Semi-Penal Institutionalisation for Women. Ashgate, Aldershot 2005.

In *Fragile Moralities and Dangerous Sexualities* Alana Barton takes a look at women considered deviant, the discourses employed to describe and explain them, and the social control exercised over them. Her account is situated in a line of intersection between criminology and history, which produces a valuable perspective. The main case explored is an institution called Vernon Lodge, with a history of nearly 200 years as a 'semi-penal' institution for women, in various guises and under different regimes. A 'semi-penal' institution, according to Barton, is an institution that is neither 'formal' in the sense of a prison, nor 'informal' in the sense of the family, but simultaneously utilises the regulatory methods and disciplinary techniques employed in both the custodial and domestic arenas. Vernon Lodge was opened in 1823, as the County Refuge for the Destitute. From 1948, it has been a probation hostel. In the years between, the institution has served several purposes: refugee for women released from prison, reformatory for recalcitrant or 'wayward' girls, institution for women deemed to be feeble-minded. Barton has reconstructed the story of the institution from original documents and records. These documents and records were stacked away in boxes in the attic of the hostel, and accidentally discovered by Barton herself and a staff member (!)

This reconstruction of an institutional story is very interesting, exemplifying a general tendency well known to students of institutions for those considered dangerous, in danger or merely a nuisance: Such institutions frequently have long historical roots, going through several metamorphoses in the course of their lives, adapting to changes

in ideological climate and hegemonic discourses, but still retaining some basic modes of functioning.

One of Barton's main purposes is to identify and describe just this constant element in the changing story of Vernon Lodge. She focuses on the efforts of the institution to reform and rehabilitate its all-female inmates, efforts which seem to have some basic assumptions in common, across decades and even centuries: 1) The main problem with the women committed or voluntarily (at least formally) staying at the institution is seen as their deviance from the norms of acceptable, feminine womanhood. 2) The model of femininity that the institution tries to socialise its inmates into, have two main components: domesticity and sexual modesty. There is also a strong tendency to regard the women as fragile, vulnerable, childlike, and simultaneously as dangerous and disruptive.

The fact that women seen as deviant are subjected to a kind of control focusing acceptable femininity, with its traditional twin pillars sexual modesty and domesticity, has been demonstrated by feminist researchers over a wide range of institutions, countries and times in history. Barton's work adds to this body of feminist research with an interesting and convincing case.

In addition to describing and analyzing the history of Vernon Lodge, Alana Barton has also done participant observation in the institution of today, and carried out in-depth interviews, both with women living in the hostel and with members of the staff. Her analysis of this material focuses on similar issues as the historical section of the book: the feminizing discourses exalting traditional femininity as the main road to a well-adapted and satisfying life; the conception of the women as vulnerable, but also as difficult to manage, more so than men; the informal, and sometimes infantilizing techniques of disciplining, frequently borrowed from the repertoire of child upbringing in the family and transferred to an institutional context. Barton manages

to convince this reader that the historical legacy of Vernon Lodge is discernible even today.

Readers from the practical field (and academic readers as well) may, however, feel a slight exasperation face to face with critical analyses of Barton's kind. Whatever the staff do, it is depicted as discipline and control, in harsh or soft varieties. Practitioners may feel in a *Catch-22*-situation. Barton herself comments on this, thus voicing a feeling of uneasiness that I think she is sharing with many other critical researchers doing work in similar fields. However, she makes an important point in indicating that most efforts to rehabilitate and help female (and male) offenders target their 'faulty thinking' rather than their material and social circumstances.

My two main critical comments to Barton's book concern theoretical perspective. I have no quarrel with Barton's main point that women are subjected to social control that focus conformity to the appropriate gender role, and that this control is exercised in a variety of contexts, formal and informal. Frequently, however, I think she is stretching this perspective too far. One example is her comment on women in prison, that experience a process of 'infantilisation': "Many women prisoners have reported that the custodial regimes they experienced encouraged a dependency culture in which they were denied the rights to make decisions about their lives and which hence reduced them to a child-like status." (p.2). This reduction to a child-like status is one of the most general findings in studies of prisons and other total institutions, regardless of the sex of the inmates. On the same page, Barton emphasizes the family as 'a major ideological site of control for women'. I do not disagree, but it may be pointed out that the family is a major site of control of men as well; a fact that is reflected in 'risk-assessment' instruments employed in prisons. In such instruments, a stable relationship to a woman is interpreted as a risk-reducing factor in the case of *male* offenders. A third example is her indication that only women are subject to informal and 'internalised' forms of control: "In other words, women are not only subjected to

formal external disciplinary regimes, as are all individuals, but are subjected to informal mechanisms of control as well as 'internalised' forms of regulation." (p. 26). If only women, and not men, were subjected to informal and internalized forms of control, human interaction would hardly be possible.

There are other examples as well. I do in no way deny that a gender perspective on social control is appropriate and fruitful. But even if gender is everywhere, it ought not to blind us to general mechanisms of social control and institutional life. Furthermore, social control as enforcement of an acceptable gender role is hardly aimed exclusively at women. I definitely think that social control of men, *as control of masculinity*, has been far too little explored. I do not criticise Barton for not having made a study on the control of men in addition to the one on women that she has done. However, I think that a greater sensitivity to the general literature on institutions, and to men as gendered beings, would have served to sophisticate and nuance her main perspectives.

The other critical point concerns the concept 'resistance'. Barton is very eager to demonstrate that the female inmates are not 'passively' submitting to the control and discipline they are subjected to. She is looking for signs of resistance everywhere, from acts of overt protest to conformity. The implicit assumption that non-resistance is synonymous with passivity, functions as a straitjacket on the analysis. It also carries a problematic normative message, implying that the only dignified reaction to control is resistance.

Despite these critical comments, Barton has written an interesting and important book. The thorough work on the history of the institution, combined with the analysis of its function today, makes the book especially recommendable.

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