Book Review/Compte rendu

Mark S. Hamm, *The Spectacular Few: Prisoner Radicalization and the Evolving Terrorist Threat*. New York: New York University Press. 2013, 237 pp. $24.00 paper (978 0 8147 2396 8).

Mark Hamm is an interesting academic character. He runs around with cultural criminologists. The goal of cultural criminology is to explore the meanings of rule-breaking activity for those who do it and those who are subject to it. *The Spectacular Few* is part of the Alternative Criminology Series of NYU Press, edited by cultural criminologist extraordinaire Jeff Ferrell. Hamm is also a former prison warden from Arizona. Both aspects of his approach to understanding criminal justice figure prominently in *The Spectacular Few*.

This is not Hamm's first book on what he calls prisoner radicalization. *The Spectacular Few* consolidates Hamm's findings from longstanding research on organized racists and skinheads, the militant right in the US, and other groups he refers to as extremists and terrorists.

Parallel to the well-known sociological contention that prisons are schools of crime, Hamm argues that religion in prison can create conditions that foster terrorist planning. However, Hamm's definitions of radicalization and terrorism are very slippery. *The Spectacular Few* begins with a history of what Hamm calls prisoner radicalization, with focus on Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Adolf Hitler. It is not clear what radicalization means here with inclusion of Winston Churchill in the sample, and it is not clear why other names such as Fidel Castro are left off the list. Hamm argues that prisoner radicalization is a double-edged sword, with possible negative and positive outcomes. His point is that prison conditions make for concentrated exposure to particular ideologies, which can have an overwhelming effect on prisoners.

Next, Hamm examines connections between the Nation of Islam in US prisons, the Black Panthers, and the popularity of figures such as Malcolm X. He details how Muslim prisoners organized to protect guards and prevent violence during the Attica Prison rebellion in 1971. He explores the emergence of the Aryan Brotherhood in prisons like Soledad, San Quentin, and Folsom. Conflict resulted in intense feuds between rival African American Muslim and white racist groups, having the unintended effect of altering the religious ideologies underpinning

these beliefs. The result is what Hamm calls the ideology of "Prison Islam" (p. 73), which promotes violence and has little to do with traditional Muslim faiths. Christian faith is likewise skewed in some prisons.

The book then skips ahead two decades and takes up the issue of prisoner radicalization and Islam in US prisons after September 11, 2001. Hamm suggests there are three schools of thought about Islam inside US prisons today. The first is that prisoner radicalization and conditions for it must be eliminated. The second is that prisoner radicalization is neither something to be alarmed about nor as frequent as criminologists propose. Hamm's viewpoint is that "the number of prisoners who actually graduate to terrorist acts are remarkably few, but their actions are nonetheless serious" (p. 46). He thus offers a left realist point of view on prisoner radicalization.

Hamm contends that prior gang affiliation, imprisonment at a large California prison, and exposure to a charismatic Islamic leader who facilitates the process of conversion are the common threads among the spectacular few who get involved in a terrorist act after prison time. Just like Guantanamo Bay, prisons in the US "may be producing terrorists rather than reforming them" (p. 71). Indeed, for Hamm, "it is a wonder that California prisons do not create radical inmates by the thousands" (p. 111). White radical right prisoners may convert to Prison Islam, argues Hamm, although among whites there are many more examples of conversion to Christian Identity associated with the Aryan Brotherhood. Hamm does suggest these ideas are skewed; of Prison Islam he writes, "Islam has nothing to do with it" (p. 145). One of the only mitigating factors is found in prisons where more traditional versions of Islam and Christianity proselytizing nonviolence have a hold.

The remainder of *The Spectacular Few* offers character sketches of several individuals who converted to Prison Islam or Christian Identity ideas in US prisons and then became involved in terrorist activity once released (or, in at least one case, while inside prison). Hamm goes into the biographies of these individuals, documenting the conditions of their confinement and the factors that resulted in their religious conversion.

A final part of *The Spectacular Few* deals with how Ibn Khaldun's ideas found in his *Muqaddimah* have become key to Prison Islam. Khaldun is credited with being the first sociologist. He examined the way that smaller nomadic groups were able to best much larger but settled populations in conquests for resources. Khaldun attributed this prowess to the sense of group feeling and sacrifice among the nomads. These ideas have resonance in Prison Islam, argues Hamm. Hamm uses this example to show how fluid religious ideas can be, and how charismatic religious leaders of prisoner subcultures recycle older ideas for

new purposes. The book ends with contemplation of how to manage prisoner radicalization using different variations of segregation.

The Spectacular Few will interest penologists, criminologists, as well as sociologists who study identity and religion. As with all books, though, there are some limitations. First, there are few details about how prison management contributes to or fosters these conditions. Second, Hamm tries to appeal to both cultural criminologists and practitioners, sending mixed messages. Third, Hamm's definitions of radicalization, extremism, and terrorism are very slippery. He conflates all kinds of categories, never really examining the difference between resistance and terrorism. Hamm uses a US Justice Department definition of radicalization, and he nonchalantly refers to Black Panthers such as Eldridge Cleaver and George Jackson as terrorists alongside Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (aka the "underwear bomber"). More conceptual rigour is required when making such claims. Finally, characteristic of left realist criminology, Hamm's views do not appear to be rooted in a critique of punishment and imprisonment more broadly.

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Kevin Walby is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice at University of Winnipeg. With Randy Lippert he is co-editor of *Policing Cities: Urban Securitization and Regulation in a 21st Century World* (Routledge, 2013) and *Corporate Security in the 21st Century: Theory and Practice in International Perspective* (Palgrave, 2014). With Justin Piché he is working on a SSHRC-funded study of prison museums and dark tourism sites across Canada.