

BOOK REVIEW

Bruce Western, *Homeward: Life in the Year After Prison* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2018)

by Marina Bell*

BRUCE WESTERN SETS A HIGH BAR FOR HIMSELF IN *HOMeward: LIFE IN THE Year After Prison*. In the opening pages, he explains the importance of an ethical framework, particularly when it concerns studying people who are or have been incarcerated. Indeed, an ethical imperative drives the book. He observes that policy is guided by the question of “what works”—or at least, it is supposed to be. But much less often do researchers and policy makers ask, “What is right?” Specifically, in this case, “What are our obligations to those who are punished?” (p. xiii). The reentry literature abounds with statistical research, studies of recidivism, and evaluations of program efficacy. Less of this research, Western says, actually depicts the lives of the people it studies. And when details of their lives are filtered out, assumptions about them lead scholars to conduct research in ways that ultimately result in shortcomings of the data—assuming people live in stable homes, pay taxes, work regularly, etc. Western indicts his own prior work among these studies. Beyond problematic data, it is also important for scholarship to tell the stories behind the numbers, “to capture the texture of life during the transition from prison to community” (p. 4). *Homeward* sets out to do just this. One of Western’s primary goals, he explains, is to bear witness, based on what he feels is an unmet need to bring these people and their stories to life.

The book is based on his Boston Reentry Study, comprised of interviews with 122 men and women leaving Massachusetts prisons and returning to neighborhoods throughout the city of Boston, as well as interviews with members of their families. Western seeks to learn what happens to them. What challenges do they and their families encounter? How do they search for work? How do they handle mental health or substance abuse problems? Why do some go back to prison? Jeremy Travis has remarked that examining criminal punishment system problems through the lens of reentry takes the

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perspective of those who go through the system. For that reason, it is useful for asking questions about our obligations to people we send to prison, and Western hopes, for offering some answers.

One significant theme that emerges from Western's analysis is how poverty refracts and exponentially exacerbates the problems that recur in the lives of those who go to prison and those affected by their incarceration. Poverty compounds mental and physical health problems, producing what he calls "human frailty."

Violence too, is deeply intertwined with, and exacerbated by, conditions of poverty. Western finds that violence is highly prevalent in the lives of his respondents, to such an extent that he refers to violence as another kind of deprivation, causing physical and psychological harm, also compounded by poverty. Western's understanding of violence disrupts the standard victim/offender binary: The United States' extreme incarceration policies, he argues, rest on a false narrative about "guilty criminals" and "innocent victims." This story "imports assumptions from middle-class life, in which a basic level of order and security prevails" (p. 9). Those privileged enough to live outside of environments rife with such poverty and violence have little basis for understanding the circumstances that most people who go to prison face their entire lives. In reality, as Western points out, there is no neat line between "offenders" and "victims." "Criminals" are the product of failed social supports, extreme poverty, violence, and addiction. Incarceration makes these problems worse.

Homeward demonstrates that our current approaches to violence misunderstand how the phenomenon actually operates in people's lives. Rather than falling onto one side or the other of the victim/offender binary, Western argues that people cycle through the roles of victim, perpetrator, and witness, sometimes occupying several roles at once; participation in violence is almost always a product of violent circumstances, present through entire lifetimes. Sociologists and system practitioners often understand offending, as an isolated matter of individual disposition and personal responsibility, which misses crucial contexts. When understood properly, Western says, justice would not be achieved by punishing perpetrators but by working to eliminate contexts of violence.

Another major contribution of the book is the argument that reentry is gendered, as well as racialized. Women in his study faced greater urgency in repairing relationships with children and families and had higher rates of PTSD, whereas men faced greater pressure securing employment. Western

and his team observe that differences in experience along racial lines grew out of the types of social inequality specific to racial groups. The common issues leading white people to prison, he argues, emerged as the result of a public health crisis, with mental illness, social isolation, chronic health problems, and substance abuse being their biggest problems post-release. For African Americans and Latinxs, Western concludes, it was more of an economic crisis that led them to prison—poor education, drug dealing, and gang involvement chosen as alternatives to minimum-wage jobs. Attempting to reintegrate, these groups faced greater rates of unemployment and lower pay and returned to the poorer, more violent, chaotic neighborhoods they came from. The poverty these groups suffer is of a different kind too, he observes: Unlike the poverty faced by whites, the poverty that African Americans dealt with was “built into the structure of neighborhoods and labor markets” (p. 170).

Perhaps one of the most important contributions of the book is Western’s critique of the recidivism standard for measuring the success of those reentering communities from prison. As he notes, “the entire correctional project ... has the reduction of recidivism as a central goal” (p. 122). This critique is far less common than it should be. We have been in need of a different standard for a long time. Employing recidivism reduction as the standard for program success has led to the false equivalence of a program’s ability to reduce recidivism with its ability to rehabilitate. In the same way, an individual’s evading recidivism is taken as an indication of their successful reintegration. There is an absence of qualitative standards for assessing a person’s quality of life post-release. Similarly, recidivism is interpreted as individual failure. Both of these views reduce highly complex processes to a binary, occluding the possibility of developing more subtly targeted interventions that might resolve some of the problems that lead to reincarceration. One suggestion Western offers—stemming from his finding that people on parole and probation experienced higher recidivism rates than those who were not, despite less involvement in crime—is to modify parole and probation so that so many people are not returned to prison for technical violations. This would require a more contextual understanding of the lives of individuals coming out of prison. Western offers a qualitative definition of successful reintegration, which evaluates people’s experiences post-release in terms of “dignity, fulfillment, achievement of life goals” (p. 35), capturing qualitative differences that the recidivism standard does not.

Accompanying his challenge to the violent/nonviolent dichotomy is a critique of reform efforts that focus on “nonviolent” individuals while maintaining a hardline stance on those categorized as “violent,” as if ‘nonviolent’ were, as he puts it, a “halo that identifies those who have not caused real harm to others” (p. 81). The relationship his participants tended to have with violence is complex and life-long. These divides—victim/offender, violent/nonviolent—are artificial; any policy based on ideas of deservingness and undeservingness is going to be at best ineffective, and at worst, it is going to exacerbate the problems it is intended to solve.

Western offers some alternative ideas about what justice might look like. This speaks to a need for the collective understanding of “justice” to mean something different from the retributive conception actualized in criminal policy today. This alternative Western proposes involves understanding the contextual, multifaceted nature of violence and acknowledging the extent to which people caught up in the prison system have been systematically, generationally, denied basic human dignities. In terms of policy, it means allowing social context to influence evaluations of moral culpability; it means treating the harmed and those who cause harm with equal degrees of dignity and compassion, because they are usually one and the same. Instead of evaluating criminal policy in terms of its “recidivism reducing” or “public safety” effects, Western suggests asking, “Does it encourage community membership, or does it deepen social exclusion?” (p. 185). Such changes would require recognizing how the carceral system has failed as a remedy for reducing violence, and how it has failed as the default welfare institution it has become. It will require reimagining what the criminal punishment system is for, its moral philosophy, and how it operates. This in turn requires recognizing, as he points out, our fundamental connectedness and mutual obligation to one another. This, to answer the question he poses at the outset, is our obligation to those who are punished.

Western’s ethical imperative and humanitarian aims in *Homeward* are well-intentioned. Nevertheless, I offer here several criticisms. First, in the second chapter where he extensively details his study methods, he explains that the study team invited currently incarcerated men to give input on the interview questions the team had devised. He describes them as collaborators in the study design. However, they did not collect data, they were not part of the implementation process, nor were they involved in the interpretation or analysis. The idea of consulting incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people has been absent from criminological research and mainstream dis-

cussions about the carceral system for too long. As evidenced by the success of many organizations doing vital social justice work—Critical Resistance, Youth Justice Coalition, Project Nia, Violence Interrupters, to name a few—one of the greatest ways for researchers to humanize incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people is not only to “give them a voice,” but also to get out of the way and let them lead. Directly impacted people are rarely considered authorities on their own experience, on the prison system, or the reentry process, with which they are more intimately familiar than anyone else. The idea that some of the greatest sources of knowledge about how to transform our current system are those who have experienced it firsthand is surprisingly absent from mainstream discussions about how to address these problems. While Western’s idea of consulting incarcerated people is a step in the right direction, this is far from a true collaboration that would allow directly impacted people to guide the process of knowledge production, without which any real “knowledge” about them will be lacking. Soliciting members of the communities in which the study team worked to provide input at every stage would have helped the project stay true to its stated ethical imperative.

Relatedly, my second criticism is the book’s lack of reflexivity regarding how the race, gender, and status of the research team members may have impacted the study. Western describes the demographic characteristics and experiential backgrounds of the study team as comprised of a colleague of Western’s, the Department of Corrections’ head of research division, several graduate students, and recent college graduates, noting that the entire team was white—with the exception of one African American and one Asian American student. None were incarcerated or formerly incarcerated, and none were from the communities that were the foci of the study. He does not indicate whether any members of the team were otherwise system-impacted. While he describes the intensive and lengthy processes through which the study team gained participants’ trust, I could not help but reflect on what may have been left unsaid, unasked, or lost in translation with this demographic and cultural gap between researchers and participants.

Western describes one of the goals of this work as “bearing witness.” However, another issue that stems from this space between “researcher” and “researched” is about the objectivity of this task, as if who is doing the witnessing had no impact on what is witnessed. With only one sentence of the book commenting on the fact that racial, socioeconomic, and experiential differences might have an impact, again, reflexivity is lacking. Would the

interpretations have been the same, filtered through the eyes of the study participants? How would they have felt about being categorized as afflicted with “human frailty”?

Western’s discussion of alternatives in his final chapter also leaves something wanting. He aptly describes prison as the social policy of last resort, the default social welfare provider, where people who have fallen through every other social safety net have ended up. But his recommendations don’t answer to this critique. He holds up programs that attend to the immediate material needs of reentering people as examples of the kind of work he believes is most needed. But this is still a downstream approach, addressing the symptoms of the problem rather than its upstream source. How do we prevent people from ending up in these conditions to begin with? His approach to alternatives treats those afflicted with “human frailty” in a de-structuralized fashion. Perhaps that is because “human frailty” itself is a somewhat de-structuralized concept, separating conditions from the historical, structural, political, and institutional contexts out of which they arise. There is a fine line between bearing witness and pathologizing. Describing the people in his study as characterized by “human frailty” evokes a sense of futility about their conditions that errs on the side of the latter. This is one area where the experiences and leadership of impacted people could have been particularly helpful.

Finally, Western’s book stands as an effective critique of the carceral system; however, the opposing perspectives against which he rhetorically positions himself reduce the power of his critique. He engages the belief that prison has an incapacitative effect, that it is good for public safety, and that tough-on-crime policies and mass incarceration have crime-reducing benefits. These are outdated foes. The more relevant position to engage is the idea that current liberal reforms are giving us a better system. He begins addressing this perspective in the final chapter of the book, but the majority of his argument is directed at views that we have long since known to be incorrect and harmful—unworthy opponents for the strengths of the book.

Regardless, *Homeward* provides an important message, particularly to mainstream reentry researchers working primarily with quantitative data. Understanding the stories behind the numbers is essential for this kind of work—both for data accuracy and for ethically principled research. The ethical imperative Western sets for his project from the beginning is something other researchers in this area would do well to incorporate.

Homeward challenges conventions and commonly held perceptions that are damaging to projects of decarceration and efforts to humanize incarcerated people and their families. Disrupting the overuse of recidivism as a measure of reentry success, as Western does, is long overdue. The study concretely demonstrates how the oversimplified victim/offender and violent/nonviolent binaries are inappropriate ways of understanding violence, and especially inappropriate as bases for criminal policy. The effort Western has put in to humanize the people in his study does not go unnoticed.