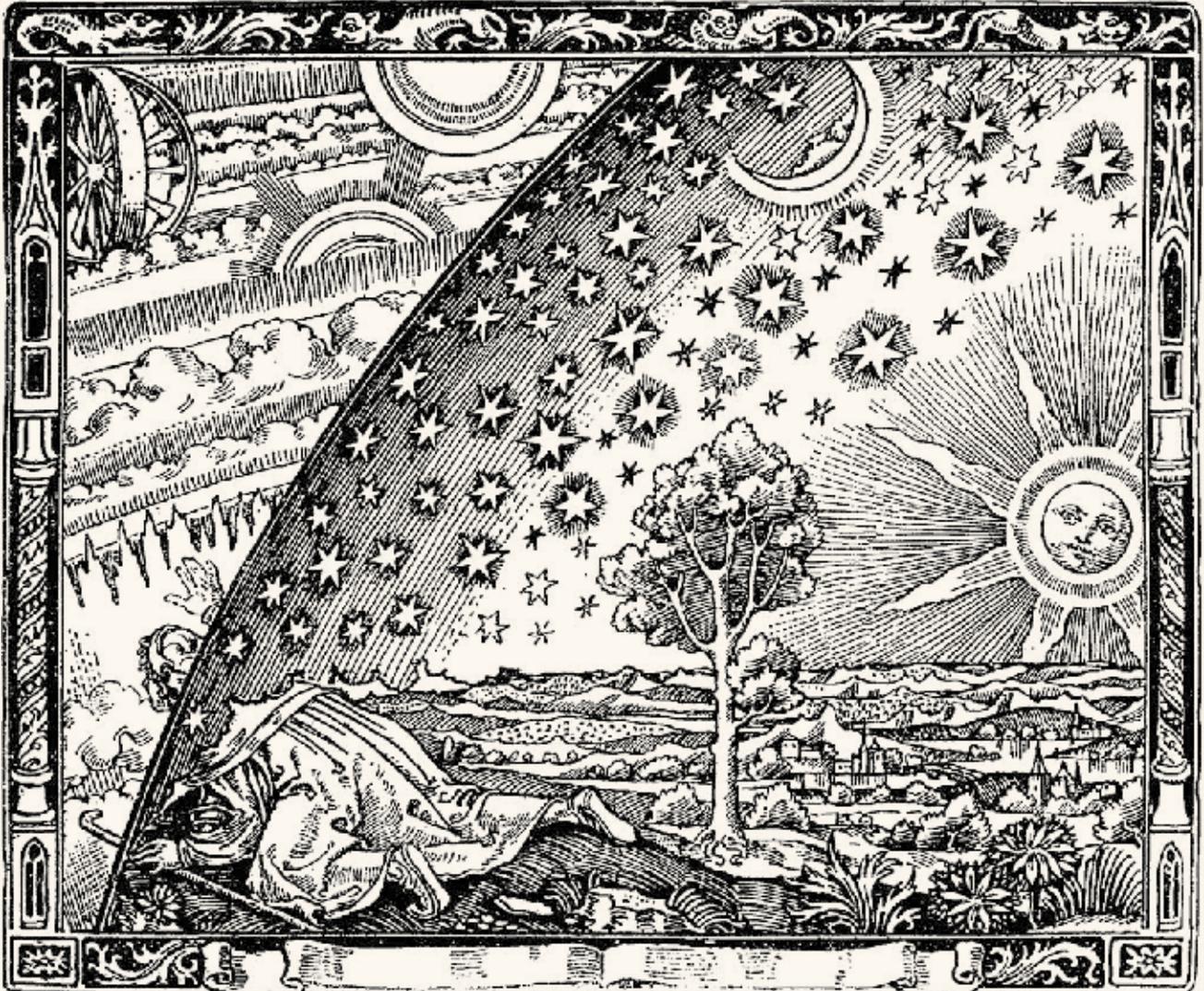


scottish justice ' matters

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REIMAGINING PUNISHMENT AND JUSTICE

PRISON-UNIVERSITY READING GROUPS



The **Greenock and Shotts Reading Groups** are reimagining justice through education

AT OUR very first meeting, prison-based students sat on one side of the room, and university-based students sat on the other. Gradually, we all became just students, sitting together as one group around the table. Some of us are talkative, others more quiet. We make relevant points, and we digress. There are agreements and disagreements, weighty conversation and tea breaks.

Since 2014, university-level reading groups have been meeting monthly; first in Shotts prison, then in Greenock and now also in Cornton Vale. The reading groups are facilitated by New College Lanarkshire, the Scottish Centre for Crime and Criminal Justice Research (SCCJR) and the Scottish Prison Service (SPS), and they bring together PhD students in Scottish Universities with undergraduate Open University students in prison. Every month a different topic of readings is chosen by reading group members. So far we have covered such issues as animal rights; the sociology of food; class; consumerism; zemiology (the study of social harms); metaphor; the portrayal of women in the media; the geography of space; and much more.

Reading groups are an ordinary activity that can create an extraordinary space of interaction. It's not all positive; there are challenges both personal and institutional that we continue to work through. The important point is we are trying to work through them together. This article is built around quotes from many of us who have been involved for a while, as insiders and outsiders, men and women, students and teachers. The quotes are organised around three, inter-related themes for reimagining justice: equality, education and community.

Equality

Equality is more than a principle. It is a practice of seeing and treating each other the same, and an experience of feeling part of a group and a conversation.

"Even though it technically is us and them, there is that elephant in the room, it doesn't feel like that, it feels equal."

"The reading group has become something to look forward to, it is somewhere neutral. Prisoners become students and our voices are heard equally with the students from the universities. These groups have been nothing but positive on a personal level and I think the PhD students have had the opportunity to see us not only as prisoners but as people who are able to contribute both to the immediate debates within the reading groups but also as being able to contribute to society as a whole."

"I particularly enjoy the reading group as it is a group of like-minded people all sharing ideas on the same subject. It's nice to be able to do this with other students and in a relaxed atmosphere. We are all equal and we aren't treated any different being prisoners."

"I came from another country hoping to find in Scotland a different way of doing punishment. It is my conviction that the reading groups are a way of achieving this. In the group, everyone is equal. There are no differences, and everyone is treated as a normal student."

"I had some reservations at the beginning of the groups: I thought prison learners might be intimidated academically, I thought the university students might be intimidated by the

environment. There have been no such issues as the groups are essentially about people coming together. The egalitarian nature of the groups has helped ensure that any labels are left behind for a couple of hours. This has been their biggest success."

Education

Education is more than acquiring information or a skill set; it is an awakening to the world and our possibilities in it, to a shared journey of curiosity, frustration and growth.

"A reading group is far more than a place of education - it is a place where all thoughts matter."

"The reading groups have been about much more than academic learning. They have been about people coming together on an equal footing to discuss, debate and learn from each other. That interaction has been extremely powerful."

This power extends beyond the meeting itself: "We often talk about our readings to our partners, flatmates, friends and families."

Reading groups are "liberating and confidence building in an otherwise depressing environment. The varied subject matter also means that the groups are interesting and thought provoking."

"Through the group, we are all improving our education. We often read things we know little about or may have never even heard of. We're broadening our knowledge, our vocabulary and horizons."

"Getting used to reading difficult papers is a good skill to achieve and the more we do it the easier it becomes."

"The reading groups are amongst the most stimulating and thought-provoking discussions I will have in any one month. I often come away with a completely new take on things. Seemingly dull articles become interesting, topics that I do not care about come to seem worthwhile. The sessions are enjoyable, full of quick-fire repartee."

"The varied academic backgrounds and interests of the members are a particularly enjoyable reminder of the pleasure of shared learning. However, my learning from the group was not limited to the range of readings covered as the group itself also raises important questions about the role and place of universities in their communities. The reading groups demonstrate not only that opportunities to participate in academic life can be reimagined in creative ways, but also that universities can, and should, play a key role in addressing some of the barriers students face, so that all can partake of the joys and advantages higher education can bring."

"Universities have a responsibility to make education as accessible as possible to everyone and promoting it as something that can be enjoyable, social and meaningful to everyone."

However, "I also have come to appreciate the complicated and constraining nature that education can have for prisoners in navigating their time in prisons and we should be mindful that groups like this do not become a tool of discipline or part of the curriculum. In that sense I feel like there is a constant need for resisting the potential for being compromised as a group and to highlight to people that we are part of internal politics."

Community

Community means more than being from the same area or having a shared interest; it is the sense of place, belonging and solidarity that emerges through regular, meaningful interaction.

Sometimes a feeling of community emerges through shared anxieties.

"The language used can be difficult to understand. I don't always feel comfortable asking people what they mean because I feel everyone else understands."

It also emerges through a welcome sense of escape from our lives outside the reading group. "When I joined the reading group I was in the final year of my PhD; a time characterised by large numbers of hours sitting alone at my laptop. The reading group was a welcome respite from what was perhaps the most isolating period of my degree."

It "removes you from prison for a couple of hours ... it makes you feel normal in that time." "When you're doing something like this, you almost literally forget that you're in prison."

And finally, discussion of the readings themselves builds connections.

"From my perspective it gave me a chance to read more widely than I ordinarily would have. I felt that there was a great rapport within the reading group that I was part of, and felt that everyone was free to express their views. It was quite an informal environment, which I think helped especially in the early stages of the groups where people perhaps did not know what to expect."

"The reading group creates a university space where those within it debate issues on equal terms. This empowers in a concrete way; where one begins to believe in oneself as part of academe."

Through our reading groups we engage in an activity common in universities all over the world. The difference is that our reading groups meet in prison. And yet in this place, we are also making a new space, one where people can come together as the community we might be, and where learning is the vehicle of both a shared journey and a shared future. The pleasures of the reading groups have been deep and often unexpected as we learn about and from each other as well as about our own potential to be part of something positive.

We want to highlight the value of reading groups without denying there are complications on both sides. The different environments of prison and university each come with their own institutional cultures and powers. The reading groups can feel like a space outside of these, but also subject to them. We cannot be naïve or passive about constraints, continually working to protect spaces such as this that allow us to enact and embody the messages and values that we seek to promote as part of just societies.

Biographical note: We are students and teachers at Edinburgh, Glasgow and Open Universities.