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'From the Field': Thoughts on BBC Panorama and Brook House IRC

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On 4 September, the BBC aired a Panorama investigation into Brook House, an immigration removal centre (IRC) beside Gatwick Airport. The hour-long programme was based on undercover footage filmed by a former detainee custody officer (DCO) who worked at Brook House for two years after leaving school. Shortly before it was broadcast, I had spent a month doing research at Brook House, which is run by G4S for the Home Office. I spoke to dozens of detainees and interviewed members of staff, none of whom suggested they knew that secret filming had taken place. (Several detainees did, however, recommend that I make a documentary and present it to the BBC.) Anyone who wants to appreciate what immigration control in modern Britain means should watch the programme, read about it and follow the Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry. Few of us ever see inside immigration detention so we ought to understand what goes on in our name with our collective consent.

BROOK HOUSE IRC

In this post, I want to reflect on how Brook House was represented on television and offer a few thoughts on the question of undercover reporting as a form of critique. How was immigration detention portrayed? What problems were identified? Was anything missing that could have been included? It goes without saying that Panorama trades in public reaction rather than painstaking accuracy. The intention is ultimately to engage viewers' emotions by confronting them with extreme material, some of which could only have been captured by an insider wearing a hidden camera. Given that IRCs are unfamiliar, secure spaces, they are perfect for this genre. They combine human interest stories with many of the major questions of our time: race, migration and mental health are just some of the issues detention brings into focus. For this reason, we should think critically about editorial choices and omissions on the rare occasion that we see immigration detention on television.

At the time of writing, around 10 members of staff have been suspended, the centre manager has resigned and several G4S investigations have begun. What longer-term impact the programme will have is unknowable, and we should remember that flashes of publicity can have unintended consequences as well as their desired effects. Time will tell whether this particular gamble pays off.

The Programme

Like other exposés of life behind closed doors, *Britain's Immigration Secrets* is shocking. In the most disturbing scene, a vulnerable detainee is restrained on the floor by several members of staff, one of whom appears to press his fingers hard into the detainee's neck and whisper threats to him. Some DCOs later trivialise what happened and seem to suggest that the details of the incident do not need to be fully recorded. Feeling angered by what he has seen, the undercover reporter Callum walks into the staff bathroom and cries. This scene is profoundly upsetting and will, I suspect, leave the most lasting impression on viewers.

Many other problems are laid bare. Some sections show the effects of drug use (particularly the psychoactive substance known as 'spice'), others uncover bullying, racist bravado and attempted suicide. Several previously detained men are interviewed about their experiences, as is a former G4S senior manager. A psychiatrist explains some of the effects of prolonged and indefinite detention, while the former Chief Inspector of Prisons Sir David Ramsbotham offers his clear-eyed, elite view that immigration control is at root the responsibility of the Home Office.

Early on in the programme we are told that Brook House has a mixed population of 'hard-line criminals' and 'asylum seekers'. This rather unhelpful distinction loses coherence over the course of 60 minutes, and the programme itself provides evidence of some of the hardship that ex-prisoners face: we see the aftermath of severe self-harm by a Romanian man who the narrator says 'isn't a nice guy'; we meet 'Paul', who has lived in the UK since he was 6, and is one of several Somalian-born people stuck in the detention estate for a long time; we see a restraint trainer encourage his colleagues to taunt a former prisoner, Mustapha, with racist slurs and beat him up away from CCTV cameras. These appalling scenes challenge the idea that there is a clear separation between 'criminals' and 'non-criminals' in detention, and suggest that some of the hardest dilemmas relate to those who could be seen as 'undeserving' of our sympathy. Fixating on the 'criminal' identity of certain detainees does, however, give us an indirect insight into how some DCOs think about the population of Brook House.

That is not to say that Brook House employees would be likely to approve of the programme. They would be quick to point out that we don't see what services and activities are available to detainees, nor does the programme show examples of dedicated staff acting with decency and civility, as many do every day. During my time there, I saw staff deal with a severely ill man who was detoxing, who they knew should not have been in detention. With few resources and little training, they patiently and consistently supported him and other men in distress. Many employees were critical of long lasting, indeterminate detention and sympathised with detainees who had been held for as long as two years.

These examples may seem to meet fairly minimal expectations, but they remind us that Panorama shows a small cast of villains in G4S uniforms rather than the whole picture. As viewers, we are presented with a compressed, Manichean account of everything that is wrong in Brook House, which bears little resemblance to the more mundane quality of everyday life.

Whether these objections are seen as understandable, defensive or simply irrelevant, it is certainly true that the programme's account of Brook House is local and internalist. Within the four walls of an apparently chaotic and unsafe centre, DCOs and middle managers are at the centre of attention. We are told little about the role of policymakers, Home Office officials, judges, escort companies, healthcare staff or other players whose actions can deeply affect detainees' lives. Moreover, although Brook House only opened in 2009, the history and politics of immigration detention is curiously absent from the programme's narrative. One striking omission is any account of the early years at Brook House, which included a riot, hunger strikes and heavy criticism from HM Chief Inspector of Prisons. Ironically, the programme was broadcast at a time when, according to official monitoring and inspection bodies, the centre was 'better' than it had ever been.

Scandalising Detention

Britain's Immigration Secrets presents a nightmarish vision of power and abuse. Witnessing such hardship is upsetting and as a viewer you are left feeling angry but helpless. But what exactly are the *causes* of these problems? Are we to infer that Brook House itself is the problem? Is it G4S and the culture among its employees? What about the Home Office? Are we the public not at fault in any way? Perhaps it is all of the above and any attempt to pin down responsibility in one place is to mistake the nature of power in a modern state. IRCs are one part of an interlocking system of state and private power that is greater than the sum of its parts. There is no single source of all problems, because detention and deportation require many different processes to work together. With a complex division of labour, different groups can blame one another for failures and minimise their own role in any wrongdoing. This dynamic plays out in detention regularly. Staff are quick to point out that power is located elsewhere: in the Home Office, in other government departments, higher up in the company, in healthcare, in escort staff, in an embassy, in the tabloid press, in public opinion, or wherever. Much to their annoyance, DCOs are occasionally required to enforce decisions they disagree with or relay bad news to detainees. However, it remains the case that indefinite detention itself is often the biggest source of people's distress, so we are right to cast a critical eye on what happens inside if we are to see what is going wrong. Academics with the time to speak to the full range of players in the system – detainees, staff, Home Office officials and others – are particularly well-placed to make sense of how contemporary immigration control exerts power over detainees.

BROOK HOUSE IRC

The final point I want to consider is that of pain and emotion in immigration detention, and specifically how these were represented on television. Panorama certainly portrayed Brook House as a place of distress and difficulty, but it was a conspicuously *masculine* kind of hardship that we saw. In between clips of boisterous men

shouting and gesticulating, we see physical injuries, self-harm using ligatures, violence, restraints, drug overdoses and protests on netting. These issues are without question serious, but it is important to remember that pain in detention is not always so visible or physical. During my time at Brook House, it was often other pains that were more unsettling. The damage that is done by IRCs is profoundly corrosive and psychological in nature, wearing people down and slowly draining away their sense of hope or agency. People feel that their dignity is diminished by eating cheap food and living among strangers; they wander aimlessly around the centre not knowing when they will be released; they hear horror stories about night-time removals and charter flights; fathers miss their children and husbands are worried that detention is affecting their marriage; men often cry as they recount their journey to Europe or show their torture scars; young black men with British accents are anxious about being returned to countries they haven't been to since they were children; under-staffed, over-worked DCOs are required to manage a population with complex needs and hope they can muddle through; people feel that they are being treated as a statistic rather than a human being rooted in a particular time and place.

These intimate pains are not necessarily shocking in the same way that self-harm or drug overdoses are. But I think they hint at some of the more principled questions about the ethics of indefinitely detaining foreign nationals in what are more or less prison conditions, and private companies such as G4S profiting from the resulting human misery. The few academics who are allowed to enter detention bear witness to the overlapping hardships detainees face, and can record how major political questions intersect with the minutiae of everyday life for migrants. In this context, staff intentions – good or bad – are a little less significant than they are made out to be on Panorama. No amount of good will can undo the profoundly unequal, coercive relationship that exists between the state and a detained person. For all the talk of 'care' and 'help', the provision of welfare services and activities, we must remember that immigration detention does not exist for the benefit of detainees. Even if we eradicated all abuse and misconduct from immigration detention, the deck would remain stacked against them and they would know it. That, too, is a tragedy and a scandal.

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