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## To Be and Not to Be: Adaptation, Ambivalence and Ambiguity in a Danish Prison

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### ABSTRACT

In a recent article on Scandinavian Exceptionalism, John Pratt urges that in era defined by a pre-occupation with penal excess, we need to explore what we can learn from the Scandinavian regimes characterized by low levels of imprisonment and exceptional prison conditions. This paper complements Pratt's comparative historical work by scrutinizing the realities of people living and working inside one Scandinavian penal regime. It explores prisoners' experiences of and adaption to institutional life focusing on implementation of security and order and the motivational and supportive work. It describes a thriving co-presence of bewildering realities where prisoners' adaptation is defined by a straining uncertainty, ambiguity and ambivalence, and where moral divides are united in the Modus Vivendi of everyday life. In this context prisoners are expected to express regrets and aspire to reform by demonstrating they are morally on course and motivated to commence a life without crime. Instead prisoners mostly use the institutional reformative stimuli to pursue their own ends that are foreign to the system. The study describes a discrepancy between penal ideals and practices and suggests that penal realities as they are experienced from within may not match the level of exceptionalism that Pratt observes from the outside.

### KEYWORDS

Moral Complexity; Institutional Logic; Adaptation; Ambiguity; Ambivalence; Prison Life

### Cite this paper

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