

# The Structure of the Inmate Population in Czech Prisons

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**The Structure of the Inmate Population in Czech Prisons.** The aim of the study was to analyse how a social hierarchy among inmates in Czech prisons is formed and reinforced. The data presented in this paper is based on the original ethnographic research conducted in Czech prisons. The data for analysis was collected from qualitative interviews with selected participants of the prison environment, observations carried out inside the prisons and from documents related to the Czech prison service. The findings indicate that the formation of inmate hierarchy in Czech prisons is strongly influenced by both endogenous (physical strength, psychological manipulation, economic capital, criminal history) and exogenous (effect of prison authority) factors.  
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## Introduction

Relatively little is known about the world behind prison walls. What we do know, however, is that a prison establishment constitutes a specific social environment with its own formal and informal rules, patterns of interaction and social structure. (Jones –Schmid 2000) In this respect, the prison can be viewed as a structured formal organisation and its structured nature is reflected in the strict separation of the staff from the inmates. (Goffman 1961) The primary focus of our study is the social structure of the population of prisoners as they constitute the main group within the prison system.

As with any other social group, the inmate population is stratified into different positions that provide their holders with both benefits and obligations. (Silberman 1988) Our aim is to analyse the social structure within the group of prisoners and the mechanisms of position allocation in the newcomers. This article thus explores how different factors reproduce and reinforce inequalities in the process of building and reproduction of male inmate's hierarchy in Czech prisons.

The choice of this topic was motivated by the fact that the current social science research in the Czech Republic has yet to fully explore this particular

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area which can provide researchers with a wealth of information regarding prison life from its participants' point of view and can also offer insights into the way the prison system operates as a whole. The effect of the prison system on the structure of the inmate subculture is illustrated by a position of the so-called "block foreman" ("barákovy" in Czech). Historically<sup>3</sup>, this was a special position officially awarded to selected prisoners and thus represented an objectionable source of inequality among inmates. The current legal framework of the prison system has eliminated this position. The question remains whether the position has also disappeared from the actual prison life and whether the intended equality between inmates has been achieved.

The data presented in this study are based on ethnographic research that involved conducting interviews with key participants within Czech prisons, observations carried out inside prison establishments and the analysis of documents related to the Czech prison service.

The first part of the paper focuses on selected theories that provide a general description of social stratification in prisons. It is followed by the description of structure formation within different prison populations with an emphasis on the inmate group. A detailed description of the research methodology is presented. The second part of the paper presents our findings.

### **Prison as a social hybrid**

Prison environment can be viewed as a total institution in which the inmate's social life is subordinate to a higher authority and bound by rules that are characterized by restricting his social life, isolating him from the outside world through social, legal and physical barriers. According to Goffman, the total institution is a social hybrid with unequal participants, i.e. the residents on one side and the representatives of the formal organisation on the other<sup>4</sup>. Their relationship is characterized by a mutual impermeability with some potential for vertical mobility within each group through the means of symbolic capital. (Goffman 1961) Members of the inmate population are not all equal either. (Silberman 1988; Tucker 1982)

Prisoners find themselves in an environment that, to a certain extent, determines them and forces upon them its ways of interaction and patterns of behaviour. Both the formal (legal rules) and informal (rules created by the subculture) organisation of the environment force the inmates to adjust to the new context.

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<sup>3</sup> The position of a block foreman has been used since as early as 1965 through the Act on The Service of Custodial Sentences. It was abolished in 1999 as a result of efforts to ensure equal rights for prisoners.

<sup>4</sup> A characteristic feature of the total institution is a social hierarchy among its members. (Gubrium 1997)

Formation of the prison subculture and the establishment of its rules is viewed as a mechanism of adaptation to life in a new environment. (Clemmer 1940) It is accompanied by the importation of new impulses in the form of personal habits and values that the incoming inmates bring with them. Therefore, the rules adopted by the subculture result from the interaction between the established rules and the new impulses.

A characteristic feature of prison environment is its masculine nature. (Kersten 1990; Phillips 2012) It is the discourse of masculinity that shapes the daily prison life and sets norms for aspects of reality ranging from social interactions of individual participants to the way they walk and hold their bodies. (Crewe 2009) Masculinity becomes one of the very few sources of one's identity. (Karp 2010) It is also the building block for the so-called prison code (Sabo et al. 2001) that represents a normative criterion of the subculture.

The prison code is based on the ideal of a macho man who actively rules his space and is able to use a variety of resources to maintain his superior status. A successful and "powerful" individual is therefore a person who comes closest to this ideal in actual practice and who can actively coerce others into obedience. On the other hand, an individual who shows signs of femininity (Kersten 1990) finds himself in a vulnerable position and moves downward in the hierarchy.

Social stratification among prisoners is viewed from a constructivist and interactionist perspective as a process of (re)constructing the ideal of masculinity and a subsequent attempt to enact this ideal. The establishment of power is affected both by the structures formed from the top (Foucault 1995) and the actual interactions between individuals. (Goffman 1961) The performance of masculinity then becomes the source of power and the key to our understanding of how a hierarchy among inmates is formed.

### **Power as the alpha and omega in inmate populations**

The power which determines the individual's status within the social hierarchy in male prisons is a result of utilizing a variety of resources ranging from physical strength, economic capital to psychological manipulation that are employed within the framework of interaction with other co-actors. The main sources of power are economic capital (DeMello 1993; Becker 1968; Ehrlich 1974; Gleason 1978; Price 1973), physical strength employed to treat other inmates unequally (Struckman-Johnson et al. 1996, Crewe 2009) and the art of psychological manipulation. (Rogers 2013; Esposito – Wood 1982) Common methods of maintaining and reinforcing superiority over other inmates are the acts that degrade an individual to a subordinate position as in the case of rape. (Smaus 2003) To demonstrate their status within the social hierarchy, inmates

primarily use visible body modifications with a tattoo being the most prevalent status-establishing tool. (DeMello 1993)

### **Means of obtaining power**

Economic capital represented by the possession of “goods”, i.e. assets with the attributes of commodity money as a universal exchangeable equivalent, provides inmates with an opportunity to control their prison life and to satisfy their restricted needs. An informal prison economy is one of the basic structural elements of the prison subculture and involves a production, distribution and consumption of goods and services<sup>5</sup>. (Davidson 1974) The prison thus gives rise to a specific hybrid enterprise where prison entrepreneurs (“hustlers”) gain access to goods and provide or arrange services that are in demand by others. Access to these goods is often secured by social bonds within the prison. (DeMello 1993)

The prison black market is based on the principle of “a closed market” which increases the attractiveness of goods otherwise viewed as standard in civilian life. The most prevalent equivalents to money within the prison barter trade are tobacco and cigarettes. In prisons, tobacco has become a value gauge as it determines the exchange rate at which the goods can be exchanged. (Gleason 1978) This rate is flexible, depending on the individual’s position within the prison hierarchy, on the negotiation process, the current level of supply of the commodity and the prison itself<sup>6</sup>.

An individual with a greater economic capital can use it to secure goods and services that in turn will satisfy his needs, such as self-protection, larger quantities of food, regular cleaning of his cell or access to information in order to manipulate others. (Price 1973) On the other hand, those who are willing to do anything to obtain goods or who beg for them show their vulnerability, desperation and their inability to secure the goods by themselves. (Crewe 2009)

Apart from the economic capital, physical capital is also crucial – big muscles and physical strength can be used against other inmates either in the form of a direct physical attack or indirectly by a threatening physical appearance– posture, way of walking, muscle size etc. (Crewe 2009)<sup>7</sup> In this way, an individual has the means to withstand pressure and attacks from other inmates and can also become an active oppressor and use his physical strength in a one-to-one conflict or to engage in activities whose purpose is to degrade and subjugate others as in the case of rape. (Struckman-Johnson et al. 1996)

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<sup>5</sup> Many leading economists in the past turned their attention to the study of criminal and prison economic activities. (Becker 1968; Ehrlich 1974)

<sup>6</sup> Apart from tobacco and cigarettes, coffee and postage stamps are also sought-after commodities.

<sup>7</sup> There can be also demonstration of higher status through specific nonverbal actions as the choice of equipment in the prison gym, the position by the billiard table or occupying larger space in the cell.

The art of psychological manipulation serves the same purpose. It is a subtle, daily undermining of the integrity of an individual who is in the position of a victim. The aim is to gain psychological superiority secured by causing feelings of fear, inferiority and inability to withstand the pressure of the manipulator's oppressive behaviour. (Rogers 2013) Psychological manipulation that is primarily based on intimidation therefore degrades them to an inferior position in order to gain control over their behaviour. (Esposito – Wood 1982: 156)

It can therefore be argued that an individual who strives to get to the top of the social pyramid within the inmate group must, by and large, demonstrate as many masculine traits as possible and that subservient members are degraded into roles that are perceived as feminine. The aim is to control the environment and its participants through masculine behaviour. The manipulator must reinforce his position of a “man”, whilst the manipulated individuals must be turned into “women”. (Tucker 1982: 68)

### **Means of maintaining and demonstrating one's superior status**

In order to maintain his superior position, the inmate must reinforce and reassert the obtained power lest he loses it. One of the ways used to subjugate “weak” individuals is rape, which is associated with masculine behaviour, the use of physical force and potential manipulation. Silberman goes so far as to claim that violence is the building block of the prison social order. (Silberman 1988) With disregard to its sexual dimension, rape becomes an instrument for dominance reinforcement in the masculine prison world. It is not a manifestation of homosexuality but of masculine superiority of a man over a non-man. The act of penetration strips the victim of his “manhood” and forces him into the position of a slave who in an entirely male environment replaces the position of a woman as a “subordinate” participant. (Smaus 2003) Given that rape is relatively common in American prisons, as reported by Silberman (1988), it can be viewed as a sort of daily ritual used as a reminder to keep the inmate social hierarchy in place. To maintain the established order, it is necessary to demonstrate one's status in such a way that is visible and clear to everyone. The tattoo is the most common tool to achieve this. (Rychlík 2005)

The formation of a hierarchy within the inmate population is a result of daily negotiations that include routine activities employed to highlight the masculine aspects of the individual's impression management. Therefore, social stratification and its formation is a process of perpetual demonstration of masculinity and the replacement of the less powerful individuals by the more powerful (more masculine) ones.

### **The effect of prison authority on inmate hierarchy**

The described sources of power and ways of formation of social hierarchy among inmates can be classed as endogenous factors. There are also exogenous factors, particularly the effect of prison authority on inmates' social status<sup>8</sup>. The history of the Czech, or rather Czechoslovak, prison system provides us with various examples of artificially created positions for inmates that paved the way to inequality between the "privileged" individuals and other "common" inmates.

### **Equal treatment versus creating natural inequality**

The current penitentiary approach is based entirely on the principle of equal treatment and impartiality in accordance with the Act on the Service of Custodial Sentences (ASCS) that stipulates that "*all prisoners serving their sentence have equal rights*"<sup>9</sup>. Prisons of all categories guarantee prisoners the same rights and it is not possible for anyone to extend these rights, e.g. by delegating their work. Protection of this right is enforced by a decree<sup>10</sup> that guarantees protection against the use of unauthorised violence and a breach of human dignity.

In actual practice, however, delegated legislation often contradicts the law and thus unintentionally allows for a social hierarchy among inmates to be formed. The previous version of the ASCS<sup>11</sup>, that was effective until 2000, stipulated that prisons set up their own so-called inmate self-government units whose purpose was to promote inmates' independence. For example, selected prisoners had the right to meet the prison management staff and discuss the framework and content of correctional-educational activities or they could act on behalf of other inmates in the event of lodging a group complaint<sup>12</sup>. In practice, this self-government unit was represented by the position of the so-called block foreman. This has now been replaced by the unit representative body which entitles prisoners to participate in prison life management in those prisons that allow some form of peer guidance (through the role of the so-called "brigadier", in Czech – "*brigadýr*"). Prisoners who are on the work programme are thus divided into work groups. Each group has a leader

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<sup>8</sup> As an alternative to terms *endogenous* and *exogenous*, the following terms may also be used: community-led (endogenous) and structurally set (exogenous).

<sup>9</sup> Act No. 169/1999 Sb., on the Service of Custodial Sentences, as amended.

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Justice Decree No. 345/1999 Sb., Rules for the Service of Custodial Sentences, as amended.

<sup>11</sup> Act No. 59/1965 Sb., on the Service of Custodial Sentences.

<sup>12</sup> Act No. 59/1965 Sb., on the Service of Custodial Sentences.

appointed by either the prison governor or an authorized member of prison staff<sup>13</sup> according to the internal prison regulations.

Previous legislation thus allowed inmates to elect their own representatives. However, these representatives often gained their position through violence or intellectual superiority. In this way, the block foreman would “invisibly” gain some powers that belonged solely to prison staff which would then strengthen his authority. He would often abuse this power for his own gain through aggressive physical or psychological attacks. The prison staff perceived this role as positive mainly because it provided a “relief” from their demanding work in the sense that conflicts would resolve “by themselves”. The downside of the existence of this role was that other inmates would try to get the block foreman to take their side through material bribes, offering services or through covering up any illegal conduct of the block foreman. This resulted in an undesirable differentiation among inmates and, more importantly, in singling out the weak individuals who were then expelled by the prison subculture to the very edge of this community. The system was thus inherently responsible for establishing a structure of the strong and the weak which consequently gave rise to policies to protect the weak<sup>14</sup>. The principal measure against the rise of this unwanted hierarchy was to completely abolish the position of the block foreman in the Czech prison system.

## Method

The data presented in this study are based on ethnographic research conducted in Czech male prisons<sup>15</sup>. Qualitative methods were used in order to gain a more detailed and in-depth understanding of the prison system from the perspective of the participants who have a day-to-day experience of prison life. Qualitative methods in prison research have been used since the days of works by Clemmer (1940), Sykes (1966) or Lombardo (1981). More recently, a qualitative approach has been used by Kateřina Nedbálková (2006a), Deborah Drake (2012), Irene Becci (2012) and Lukáš Dirga and Jaroslava Hasmanová Marhánková (2014). Our research focuses on the perspectives of the key groups of participants – inmates, prison guards and prison management.

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<sup>13</sup> Government Regulation No. 65/1999 Sb., on the Remuneration of Prisoners Working during the Service of Custodial Sentences (22 December 1999) and the subsequent Directive No. 48/2000 issued by the Director General of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic on the Remuneration of Prisoners Working during the Service of Custodial Sentences.

<sup>14</sup> The issue of violence among prisoners is currently regulated by the Directive No. 12/2012 issued by the Director General of the Prison Service of the Czech Republic on Early Detection of Violence among Prisoners. Under this directive, individual organisational units have a duty to keep registers of potential subjects of violence and of groups of aggressors or prisoners with violent tendencies, i.e. potential violent offenders.

<sup>15</sup> We would like to thank all the respondents and research participants for their willingness to take part in our study as it would not have been possible to conduct our research without them. We would also like to thank the management staff of the prison establishments in which our research was conducted. We appreciate their cooperation in allowing us to conduct our research inside their establishments.

Through an analysis of the perspectives of these three groups of participants, we aimed to gain a comprehensive picture of the researched topic and to provide a detailed description of the social hierarchy within the inmate population both from the perspective of the inmates as well as other participants who are involved in the daily prison life.

The data for analysis has been collected from the following sources: semi-structured interviews, observations carried out inside the prison establishments and documents related to the Czech prison service. In 2013 and 2014, we conducted 40 interviews with prison inmates, 20 interviews with prison guards, 5 interviews with management staff and we spent about 300 hours carrying out observations inside prisons. We decided to narrow our focus to category C<sup>16</sup> prisons only, in order to be granted permission to conduct research inside the prison establishments and also because category C<sup>17</sup> prisons house the largest proportion of prisoners in the Czech Republic. The interviews and observations were carried out in five prisons within the Czech Republic. The participants differed in their age and time spent in prison<sup>18</sup>. The average duration of interviews with prison guards and prison management staff was 90 minutes, the interviews with prison inmates took about 60 minutes. The interviews with prison guards took place mostly in informal settings, either in their homes or restaurants. The inmates were interviewed inside the prison establishments, mostly in the office of the special education practitioner. The interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis where only the researcher and the respondent were present in order to eliminate any distractions that the presence of another person could cause<sup>19</sup>.

Prison research is highly challenging mainly because of difficulties with contacting and obtaining potential participants. For this reason, we decided to use the method of snowball sampling whereby we obtained research participants through recommendations from the participants who had already been interviewed. This method was employed mainly when conducting interviews with prison guards. To obtain our first participants, we made use of our own social networks and contacts from previous research studies. In each of the prison establishments it was necessary to find the key gatekeeper who would help us obtain permission to access the inner premises of the prison,

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<sup>16</sup> The Czech prison system recognizes 4 prison categories: Category A – Minimum Security Prison; Category B – Medium Security Prison; Category C – High Security Prison and Category D – Maximum Security Prison.

<sup>17</sup> As of 16 December 2014, the prison population of Category C prisons was 9 093 out of the total prison population of 18 564, which is about 49 % of the total prison population (source: The Prison Service of the Czech Republic – <http://vscr.cz/generalni-reditelstvi-19/informacni-servis/rychla-fakta/> – [Accessed 16 December 2014]).

<sup>18</sup> With regard to prison guards, the age range was between 21 and 56 years and the time spent in their job role ranged from 2 to 17 years. With regard to prison inmates, their terms of imprisonment ranged from 3 years to life sentence.

<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, as far as it was practicable, maximum security provision was maintained during interviews in order to minimize any potential risks arising whilst conducting research in such a specific environment.



assist us in arranging the first contacts with the respondents and provide us with guidance in the prison environment. The selection of inmate respondents was always based on the consultation with education workers, psychologists or special education practitioners.

Prior to each interview, the respondents signed an informed consent form that guaranteed anonymity. Most interviews were recorded using recording devices, however, in some cases this was not possible for security reasons. During interviews, the researchers took notes which were then rewritten in more detail after the interview. We also kept a field diary in which we recorded our observations of free-time activities of the inmates, of psychological and therapeutic sessions, handing out meals, work activities at workplaces and many other group activities. The interview recordings were then transcribed verbatim and analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Ezzy 2002: 86-94) with the use of MAXQDA.

The following section of the paper looks into the social hierarchy within the inmate population in Czech prisons, the mechanisms of stratification and the factors that contribute to obtaining power and to the subsequent inequality between prisoners. The final part of our data interpretation provides an analysis of the effects that prison authority has on the inmate hierarchy.

### **The king, fool and workhorse**

The results of the data analysis indicate that the inmate population of Czech category C prisons is vertically stratified into three positions<sup>20</sup> – the king (Czech term *Král*) as the boss of a given prison space, the fool (Czech term *Šašek*) acting as a link and having a neutral role and the workhorse<sup>21</sup> as a position at the very bottom of the prison hierarchy<sup>22</sup>. The king has the power and controls the prison environment. He influences other prisoners' activities, manipulates his fellow inmates and uses his status to maintain and reinforce his superiority. The king must be sufficiently physically strong and unforgiving in

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<sup>20</sup> Our research was conducted in prisons where a predominant form of accommodation is a collective (residential) one which is characterized by open bedrooms (cells) which allow for intensive contacts between the inmates. The hierarchy is co-formed by a physical space (comprising of one floor) that is occupied by 50 to 100 inmates which is the predominant form of accommodation in Czech establishments. The prisoners live in wards where they share bathroom facilities, smoking areas and lounges. These provide them with ample opportunities to circulate within their community. This in turn significantly contributes to the formation of the hierarchy within the prison subculture. The hierarchy changes regularly depending on the inmate turnover within wards as a result of inmates either being released or permanently transferred to another prison.

<sup>21</sup> The original Czech term "*konina*" is difficult to translate into English. Possible translations are "*horse-flesh*", "*horse-meat*" or "*workhorse*". We have decided to use the term "*workhorse*" as it is closest to the original meaning in terms of someone being forced to do work that others are not willing to do themselves. From the data analysis mentioned terms "the king", "the fool" and "the workhorse" seem to be universal in prisons, which we investigated.

<sup>22</sup> With regard to the analyzed space of one floor mentioned above, there is always one king that controls this space. The group with the highest number of members are the fools with a neutral position followed by a considerably smaller group of workhorses.

his conduct and his ambition to have the control over the prison environment. These attributes distinguish him most from the fool who has no ambitions to gain power. The fool possesses sufficient physical and mental strength to withstand the outside pressure and not to give in to it, which would otherwise turn him into a workhorse. The fool appears to have a neutral position between the king and the workhorse – he is not controlled by the king and has no ambition to control the workhorse. Workhorses (in foreign prisons called “fraggles”, “muppets” or “donuts”) (Beck 1995) are those inmates who are naive and weak and not able to withstand the pressure exerted on them by other inmates. After some time, they adopt the role of slaves carrying out duties set by others.

To determine which of the positions a newcomer is going to adopt, a specific mechanism is in place whereby the newcomer is tested by other inmates. The first stage involves psychological manipulation where the individual is exposed to a strong pressure from other inmates who usually try to get some sensitive information from him, to intimidate and psychologically manipulate him. The newcomer gets orders such as “make me some coffee”, “bring me this”, “do this” whilst it is monitored whether he complies. The next stage is an intimidation phase (so-called psycho) where the inmates deliberately try to scare the newcomer and observe his reactions (e.g. they throw a chair on the floor or imitate a punch and observe whether the newcomer has been startled by this). The final stage of the testing process is actual physical confrontation. It does not usually involve a big fight, its function is only to test the newcomer’s level of courage and readiness to fight. How the testing mechanism works is described by Karel.

(Karel – inmate<sup>23</sup>): *When a new inmate comes to the cell, everyone is at him straight away, they are in his face and wait if he buckles or keeps his footing. After some time, there is a fight, he must take part in it and even if he loses, he gains respect and is not turned into a workhorse. But as soon as he shows fear and weakness, he is a lost case, he has become a workhorse and will forever serve others.*

Karel’s statement contains an interesting mention of gaining respect, which in male prisons equates to fulfilling the ideal of masculinity – a successful individual is someone who is sufficiently aggressive, does not show fear, is ready to physically confront others and is not prepared to carry out any duties or orders. On the contrary, he is the active aggressor who wants to gain power and control over his environment.

Formation of a hierarchy and the placing of individuals into different categories is a result of a negotiation process whereby an individual (either a

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<sup>23</sup> To protect respondents’ anonymity, we use pseudonyms which were created for the purposes of the research analysis.

newcomer or a permanent member of the inmate group) is confronted by other members in order to gain a leading position, maintain the current position or to move up the hierarchy (this process can be classed as an “elite” replacement). An individual who is able to demonstrate more masculine aspects than his opponent then takes up his new position and the loser moves down the hierarchy.

With reference to the positions within inmate hierarchy described in the previous text, it is apparent that the key factors in this process are mainly physical strength (Struckman-Johnson et al. 1996; Crewe 2009) and mental resilience or rather the art of psychological manipulation. (Rogers 2013; Esposito – Wood 1982) However, these are not the only personality attributes that are instrumental in obtaining power in the prison environment<sup>24</sup>.

### **“A real man is made of strength, manipulation, money and fame”**

Physical and psychological superiority are the predominant factors in Czech prisons, however, economic capital and “reputation” are also rated highly by inmates. All these factors contribute to the ability to assert oneself in order to gain the position of the king and to control the environment.

If one wants to become a king, the crucial attributes he has to possess for the process of position negotiations are physical strength and big muscles. They are the key qualities through which to gain control over the environment. (Struckman-Johnson et al. 1996; Crewe 2009) This was also confirmed by our study –these factors were mentioned most frequently as the means to withstand outside pressure and to have the chance to become a king. Extracts from interviews with Roman and Jakub outline the attributes of an ideal king.

(Roman – inmate): *The king must be big and strong, must have muscles and strength and mustn't be afraid to use them. He must demonstrate to everyone that he has muscles. He must give out an impression of such strength that everyone is afraid of him and no one dares to stand up to him.*

(Jakub – inmate): *The strongest one always wins. The kings are the stronger ones. But it's not only about physical strength, although that comes first, you also have to have some intelligence and be shrewd to be able to manipulate others.*

Physical strength is perhaps the most significant factor in social interactions with fellow inmates, however, it is not the only attribute prisoners rely on. Jakub mentioned intelligence or shrewdness, which can be placed in the category of psychological manipulation. This factor is crucial in an effort not to

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<sup>24</sup> Research has also been conducted in Czech female prisons the findings of which showed some other significant factors, such as age and education. (Nedbálková 2006b) In contrast to female inmates, our research has not confirmed the significance of these factors in male prisons. The significant factors in male prisons are primarily violence, developed muscles and physical strength.

become a workhorse and to withstand outside pressure or to control others. (Rogers 2013; Esposito – Wood 1982: 156) If an individual is sufficiently mentally resilient and shrewd, as described by our respondents, he will not become a workhorse because his intelligence will help him avoid risky situations and dilute the pressure from other inmates. Mental maturity and strength are important if an individual strives to get to the top of the prison hierarchy. Physical strength allows him to raise feelings of fear and respect in others, which can then be used for psychological manipulation. If the king possesses sufficient mental strength he does not even have to use physical strength, as illustrated by Jozef.

(Jozef – inmate): *If he's clever enough (the king – authors' note), he can lie his way out of many situations and in the end he doesn't even have to stand up to anyone, that's when it can come in handy (intelligence and psychological resilience – authors' note). This is also important if you want to be a king and rule others – you must not only be strong but have brains too, so that no one can manipulate you and so it is you, actually, who can persuade others to do what you want without the need to beat them up.*

Effective manipulation and creating an impression of an unwavering ruler are also supported by “good prison reputation” and economic capital. (DeMello 1993, Becker 1968, Ehrlich 1974, Price 1973, Crewe 2009) Possession of goods and their exchange or redistribution are the foundations of an informal prison economy in which otherwise ordinary goods gain a luxury status in the prison environment. (Davidson 1974) Through their possession, inmates can gain significant privileges, such as protection or regular cleaning of their cells. (Price 1973, Crewe 2009) The significance of the possession of goods in prison and the value of tobacco is discussed by Michal.

(Michal – inmate): *Tobacco here – it's like money outside. You can buy anything for tobacco. To get a tattoo costs four tobaccos but it depends who you are. If you wanted to get a tattoo, the tattooist would ask for ten tobaccos because he doesn't know you. I would have it for five. No one does anything for free here.*

Michal also says that prison barter is carried out not only through goods but also services. One of them is sexual service. Whilst in the past this service often used to be enforced, nowadays it is offered as a paid service.

(Michal – inmate): *You can make a phone call for tobacco if you can get to a phone, you can have a picture of your family drawn, some act as girls to others for tobacco. They even call themselves as such and give themselves women's names.*

The other end of the spectrum is occupied by the poor who are prepared to do almost anything for tobacco. By asking repeatedly for some of the

commodities they demonstrate not only their inability to get hold of the goods themselves but mainly their vulnerability. (compare Crewe 2009)

However, there are situations when economic capital combined with physical weakness can be a disadvantage rather than an opportunity to control others. Martin, a prison guard, explains.

(Martin – prison guard): *The elderly or the disabled with pensions are very popular. It's because they are weak so they get picked by some groups, be it the block foremen or gypsies, who tell them to do shopping for them. And they do because they want to have a quiet life. And what usually happens is that there's nothing left from their pensions and in the end it's the pensioners who have nothing and who are begging for ciggies. It's often spotted by education workers when they see that a pensioner goes shopping and doesn't even know what he wants. For example, he goes to get some cocoa and the canteen lady asks him which one he wants. And he doesn't know. Or he is a non-smoker and is buying cigarettes.*

When adopting a position within the prison hierarchy, “good reputation” based on one’s criminal history<sup>25</sup> must also be taken into account. It helps us identify the inmate’s aspirations and qualities. However, “good” reputation is not always meant as some crimes predispose their offenders to be pushed to the edge of the subculture<sup>26</sup>. Lukáš explains.

(Lukáš – inmate): *We got high the other day (use of narcotics – authors’ note) and I found out that there's a guy in my unit who molested his eight-year-old daughter so I gave him what for. This is not tolerated here.*

Vertical mobility within the inmate subculture does not apply to offenders with the history of child rape as they find themselves on the margin of the group. Prison rape that used to serve as a demonstration of power and its maintenance (Struckman-Johnson et al. 1996) is nowadays perceived more as a service used as a bartering tool on the prison market. It no longer serves as the exclusive means of reinforcement and demonstration of power<sup>27</sup>.

Different types of positions within the inmate hierarchy are a result of negotiations and elite replacement. The key attribute in this process is the ability to demonstrate a community-led masculinity and to withstand the pressure when others try to topple the individual from his position. As prison is a highly masculine environment (Phillips 2012), the crucial factors that determine divisions between different positions are logically the aforementioned masculine qualities (as opposed to the feminine ones). In this

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<sup>25</sup> Criminal history does not only include the committed crime(s) but also time spent in prison and the categories of prison one has been incarcerated in.

<sup>26</sup> It is the case of those offenders who are serving their sentence for rape, especially of children.

<sup>27</sup> In contrast to female prisons (Nedbálková 2006b), sexuality has not proved to be a key analytical category in the male prisons analyzed in our research.

respect, a winner is someone who is able to establish an association between himself and the masculine characteristics within his environment. However, securing a position in the hierarchy is not the end of the process. After the initial gaining of a position, the given individual must then defend his position through confrontation with his opponents or win a higher-level position. A specific way to defend one's position is by demonstrating power.

### **Visual demonstration of power**

After being sent to prison and finding their position within the prison hierarchy, prisoners often have themselves tattooed. The tattoo is an universal symbol of prison subculture in all prisons around the world and has developed into a diverse and ingenious system of signs. One can get a tattoo either voluntarily or involuntarily. Tattoos obtained involuntarily are often used to mark other inmates or to punish them. The tattoo designs are often vulgar, ridiculing, offensive or humiliating, as is especially in cases of penises tattooed on men's faces. Tomáš comments on this type of tattoos.

(Tomáš – inmate): *I've seen some terrible tattoos. One inmate had these two sausages here (on temples – authors' note). Well, they were not originally sausages but penises. They did it to him for snitching. They gave him a beating and then tattooed him. He then later had it redone to sausages.*

Involuntary tattoos are often performed on weak individuals who breached the informal prison code<sup>28</sup>. Although the symbolic significance of tattoos has diminished over time, these soft bodily mutilations can still be used to demonstrate one's position or views. (Rychlík 2005) Tattooing is also a service that is commonly used in prison barter trade.

The factors described above can be classed as endogenous (internal) factors shaping the inmate hierarchy in Czech prisons. These factors are established, negotiated, reinforced and reproduced by the inmate community and integrated into the subculture's social code. There are also some significant exogenous (external) factors, such as the effect of prison authority on the inmate's social status. They are discussed in the next part of the paper.

### **Do Czech prisons have their “block foremen”?**

As the previous text indicated, the prison authority in Czech establishments used to interfere with the inmate hierarchy by creating the position of a so-called block foreman<sup>29</sup>. These inmates held a special position that was stipulated by the law which then resulted in an indisputable inequality between

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<sup>28</sup> There are also cases when the prison tattooists experiment with coloured inks on workhorses without any payment in return.

<sup>29</sup> Act No. 59/1965 Sb., on the Service of Custodial Sentences.

prisoners. When a new framework for the Czech prison system was being drawn up after 1999, this position was eliminated. The current prison system is based on the principle of equal treatment of prisoners, which forbids the position of a block foreman<sup>30</sup>. However, has the application of this principle eliminated the system-based inequality in actual practice? Our answer is unequivocal – it has not. Despite being based on the principle of equality, the system creates differentiation among inmates. An interesting finding is that despite the block foreman position being officially abolished, the actual practice shows that it is still maintained by both inmates and the prison management.

(Filip – inmate): *I've been a block foreman in our prison for some time now and there were other guys before me who were also block foremen. This is normal, it's a common practice.*

(Patrik – management staff): *We do have block foremen here and we rely on them. If there is a problem they help us deal with it. It has proved useful and we didn't want to get rid of it. It is easier if a problem among prisoners is resolved by another prisoner rather than us getting involved (prison management – authors' note). The prisoners know he is the block foreman and so will not challenge him as much. He has a special status and this helps him resolve any issues.*

Patrik's and Filip's comments indicate that the position of a block foreman still plays an important role in Czech prisons and this is reflected in the inmate hierarchy. The block foreman has his duties (to communicate with the prison management, help resolve issues among inmates and be partially responsible for keeping order in the cells) but his position also provides him with benefits. The inmates reported that they are always well aware who the block foreman is and that they must treat him differently to other inmates. This position is often awarded to those inmates who are respected by other inmates and who have already established their position, which means they use the foreman position to further reinforce their status. However, it is not always the case that the king is the block foreman.

(Václav – inmate): *I know that as a block foreman my status is different from others. I know that when I come and give an order, then that's that and everyone conforms because they know they would otherwise have a problem. I don't abuse my position but at the same time I can enforce what I want. Others know not to challenge me so I have a peaceful life.*

Václav's words indicate that the position of a block foreman certainly impacts on inmates' lives. This therefore confirms the effect of prison authority on the inmate population. This external factor gives rise to unequal positions

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<sup>30</sup> Act No. 169/1999 Sb., on the Service of Custodial Sentences, as amended.

and relationships between prisoners. This is then exploited by block foremen who can manipulate other inmates based on their position that is provided for them by the prison authority<sup>31</sup>.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored how social hierarchy among Czech prisoners in category C prisons is formed and reproduced in the prison community. The results of our ethnographic research indicate that the Czech inmate population is stratified into positions of kings, fools and workhorses which differ in their access to benefits and the extent of control over daily prison life<sup>32</sup>. The amount of power obtained is determined by endogenous factors. The most significant ones are physical strength (compare with foreign research Struckman-Johnson et al. 1996; Crewe 2009), economic capital (compare DeMello 1993; Becker 1968; Ehrlich 1974; Price 1973; Crewe 2009) and psychological manipulation. (compare Rogers 2013; Esposito – Wood 1982) In this respect, Czech prisons are not much different from their foreign counterparts.

An interesting shift can be observed in the case of rape as the means of maintaining one's superiority and the control over the victim. (Struckman-Johnson et al. 1996; Smaus 2003) In Czech prisons, rape is not part of the inmates' daily reality<sup>33</sup>. The violent nature of the sexual act has been replaced by the economic aspect and in most cases it is performed voluntarily for an exchange for something else. However, this does not rule out the fact that this behaviour reinforces the inequality between inmates. The buyer of the sexual service demonstrates his power and masculinity (active penetrator) whilst the person offering his body shows his subservience and adopts a feminine role. The sexual act, albeit not violently enforced, thus still remains the means to reinforce unequal positions between inmates and to demonstrate masculinity. The winner is an individual who can demonstrate more masculine attributes and who does not allow his masculinity to be undermined by others. The loser, on the other hand, voluntarily adopts a submissive role and performs set duties, such as cleaning, cooking, running errands, surrendering sexually etc. The fact that most of these services are paid does not alleviate the loss of masculinity.

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<sup>31</sup> In most cases, the situation in male prisons is such that if the king is interested and makes a sufficient effort, he has a high chance to adopt a position of a block foreman. This is not always the case, however, the fact remains that the king possesses such a significant and indisputable symbolic capital that this often makes him a first choice for this position by the prison staff mainly due to his influence on other inmates. This results in an unwritten and implicit consensus between the inmates and the guards whereby the guards and other prison staff try to ensure an effective self-government whilst the prisoners respect the authority of the king.

<sup>32</sup> In the prisons we analyzed, there were no significant differences in the process of forming a hierarchy.

<sup>33</sup> This shift can be traced in the modern history of the Czech prison because during the Czechoslovakian prison system was to rape a normal part of the prison experience. (Schwartz – Schwartz 1989)



Apart from the endogenous factors, certain exogenous factors also impact on the inmate hierarchy. The most significant one is the systemic creation of artificial inequality between inmates in the form of special positions. Whilst in the case of endogenous factors power is obtained through inherent personal qualities (physical strength, economic capital, intelligence, criminal history, etc.), external factors mean that power is granted to someone “from outside”. The presence and reinforcement of these positions in Czech prisons is most intriguing considering that they have been abolished by the law, however, the daily reality of Czech prisons still heavily relies on them.

A characteristic feature of male prisons is their masculine nature with its typical attributes of violence, active seeking of one’s self-assertion and efforts to gain a superior position. (Connel –Messerschmidt 2005) This establishes a framework for position negotiations within the inmate population. In this process, individuals use a variety of factors in order to gain power whereby the concept of masculinity in Czech male prisons takes on various forms of endogenous factors mentioned above. The resulting form of prison hegemonic masculinity stems from the interaction of endogenous and exogenous factors in the process of social interactions between the participants of the prison world.

Each individual entering this process brings a different „package” with them. Therefore, some individuals are at an advantage whilst others are disadvantaged. This is determined by the norms that are applied in a given environment. In our case, the advantage is in the hands of those who most demonstrate such aspects of behaviour that the community perceives and establishes as masculine. Therefore, should we view the prison as a microcosm of perpetually repeated social interactions, it is apparent that the form of the inmate hierarchy in Czech prisons is a result of daily repeated patterns of performed normative masculinity.

We must also point out some limitations of our study. The main limitation was that our research was restricted to category C male prisons only. Our motivation for this was explained in the Method section. As a result, we have no comparison with Czech prisons of other categories. On the other hand, this opens up a venues for future prison studies that might want to focus on comparative research. Apart from comparing different Czech prisons, international comparative studies should also be considered. Considering a long joint history, the Slovak prison system seems to be an obvious choice. Until January 1993, the prison systems of both countries operated under the common framework. Following their separation, there is an exciting opportunity to analyze changes in the respective systems, although both countries have in their recent history been applying the principles of the European Prison Rules to their prison systems. (The Czech Prison Service 2006) An important incentive for a comparative research into the inmate hierarchy comes from current

legislation regarding the service of custodial sentences – whilst the Slovak prison system allows the formation of prison self-government units (Sec. 86), the Czech legislation abolished it in 1999<sup>34</sup>. Striving for a uniform approach, the Czech prison system evolved differently in the areas that both directly and indirectly give rise to the inmate hierarchy. This poses a question whether abolishing the self-government units<sup>35</sup> in the Czech Republic has really resulted in minimising the risks of undesirable dominant positions. As neither country has any substantial body of prison research, a comparative study would provide a chance to analyse any changes in developments after almost a quarter of a century since the separation.

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<sup>34</sup> Compare: Act No. 475/2005 Sb. and Act No. 169/1999 Sb., on the Service of Custodial Sentences of the Slovak Republic and of the Czech Republic, as amended.

<sup>35</sup> Section 86, Act No. 475/2005 Sb., on the Service of Custodial Sentences of the Slovak Republic, as amended, stipulates the formation of prison self-government to assist with maintenance of constitutional order and the organisation and provision of educational and cultural activities, to deal with health and safety at work issues and to prepare prisoners for their post-prison life.

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