

Book Review

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Matt Tidmarsh, *Professionalism in Probation: Making Sense of Marketisation*, London: Routledge, 2021; 222 pp. (including index). ISBN: 978-0367621933, £36.99 (ebook), £120 (hbk)

Just seven years after it began in 2013, and amid a pandemic which has put enormous pressures on criminal justice institutions, the Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) programme was officially brought to an end. Under TR, and on the basis of little evidence, probation in England and Wales was split into an outsourced provision for low- and medium-risk offenders run by 21 regional Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs), to be contracted out to private- and third-sector providers – with high-risk offenders remaining under the supervision of a shrunken state-run National Probation Service (NPS). CRCs would be incentivised to reduce reoffending through a largely untested ‘payment by results’ model, alongside fixed ‘fees for service’ for some required activities.

By most measures, TR has been a disaster: disruptive to probation practice, riven by IT problems, wasteful of public money, and unable to deliver the reductions in reoffending which supposedly would be unlocked by the ‘innovation’ of the market. Many will have been relieved when TR ended, returning probation to state control. One might be forgiven, then, for thinking that TR was a short aberration in the history of a successful public service, as well as an attack on the professional status of probation staff.

Matt Tidmarsh’s thorough and compelling book challenges several mainstream understandings of TR, working on and between the key concepts of his title: marketisation and professionalism, introduced in Chapters 1 and 2 respectively and brought into progressively closer dialogue, with underlying tensions brought out and explored, through a carefully devised, clear and logical structure, assisted by ample use of illustrative quotes and extracts from observation.

Based on an ethnography of an urban CRC, *Professionalism in Probation* situates TR as a wider movement towards ‘marketisation’, which Tidmarsh is careful to distinguish from ‘privatisation’. Marketisation is not simply the transfer of services to the private sector, but the politically-driven imposition of the economic *logic* of markets on public services, and the concomitant multiplication of stakeholders to whom probation (and its staff) may be held accountable. Even under TR, the state remained deeply involved with the CRCs: as a supplier of (involuntary) clients, as shaping the socioeconomic conditions of the market, and through the continuation of an attenuated NPS.

Hence, Tidmarsh argues that TR is not an aberrant experiment in ‘privatisation’, but a continuation of longer-term trends towards marketisation, beginning in the era of New Public Management and continuing through the New Labour years with the Carter

report, the creation of NOMS and the imposition of performance management frameworks (Burke and Collett, 2010). A thought-provoking section in Chapter 4 positions these developments as part of a shift in the identity of probation itself, from a distinct professional identity to an infrastructural identity, shared with other justice services and centred on joined-up, 'end-to-end' offender management.

Tidmarsh is fundamentally concerned with the impact of the reforms on people working in probation. His second core concept, 'professionalism', is understood through a productive 'tension' between functionalist understandings (professionals as public-spirited) and more critical neo-Weberian accounts of professionals as a self-interested clique protective of their class interests. The probation officer fits the mould of a 'classic' welfare state professional, going in a few decades from irregular volunteer missionary to university-educated public servant, then increasingly condemned as an out-of-touch elite in a polity that has 'had enough of experts'. Tidmarsh's own respondents conceptualise their professionalism in various ways – autonomy, thoroughness, interpersonal skills, discretion, public-spiritedness and organisational loyalty.

Drawing on the tradition of Foucauldian analyses of probation (Cohen, 1985), Tidmarsh turns the lens on probation *staff*, who appear as 'supervisors, perpetually supervised', while also upending the assumption of a 'free' market in probation (and reminding us, almost in passing, of the non-existent evidence base for TR). One of the political justifications for TR was to 'free' probation professionals from the target culture and managerial control of the New Labour era; in reality, the 'discipline' of the market *increased* centralisation and imposed stricter targets on probation professionals, who found themselves increasingly accountable to multiple stakeholders for targets, particularly for 'fee for service' payments – with pressure building further as 'failing' CRCs were subject to increasingly stringent inspections.

Chapter 5, a highlight of the book, centres on the architecture of the CRC office, divided into 'downstairs', where interviews and supervision work with probationers take place, and 'upstairs', where officers 'feed' their computers to ensure compliance with managerial and market-led targets. Many readers (including one or two academics) will recognise Tidmarsh's portrait of professionals who find their time ever more consumed by bureaucratic 'volume work', with less and less scope for the tasks that motivated them to enter the role in the first place.

Probation culture is argued to have persisted – despite TR, prior marketising reforms, and through earlier shifts from rehabilitation to risk management and 'punishment in the community'. It centres on working with people (not with things), non-judgmental attitudes to offending, belief in change and a recognition of social-structural factors implicated in offending. In this, Tidmarsh echoes Mawby and Worrall's (2013) *pre-TR* ethnography, but updates their insights and extends them to the unqualified probation *service* officers who made up the bulk of CRC staff. Chapter 7 uses Bourdieusian theory to analyse the habitus of probation staff and the persistence of probation culture. This framework could perhaps have been given a little more space to breathe; capital is strangely absent from the analysis, and there are some missed opportunities to engage with the penal field literature and to 'weave' Bourdieusian theory into the other chapters. The use of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 2012), however, is welcome, grounding the analysis in the emotional demands of working in probation.


This culture may be hidden in much of everyday practice, or may surface in everyday acts of resistance, as demonstrated in the working day of one officer, ‘Arthur’ (Chapter 6), who – seeing autonomy as key to professionalism – insists on carrying out probation work in community spaces, despite the added time pressure on his ‘upstairs’ work. Yet while probation professionals have autonomy in how they do their job, they have always lacked autonomy over how their work is organised, as this is dictated by the government and the courts (the same reason that TR is not a ‘market’ in the traditional sense).

In practice, Tidmarsh argues, a strained form of ‘organisational professionalism’ has emerged, between the functionalist and neo-Weberian perspectives, in which professionals’ moral commitment to their work is harnessed to the goals of the organisation; officers’ own sense of ‘professionalism’, then, appears alongside the mechanisms of the market as another way in which they are disciplined at a distance. This, and the accompanying increase in workloads, have placed enormous strain on probation professionals, with implications for work-life balance and rising rates of sickness and stress-related absence, exemplified by ‘Will’, whose efforts to spend time helping probationers *and* meet all his administrative targets led to an extended period off work with stress.

Concluding with reflections on the possible futures of probation (Chapter 8), Tidmarsh draws on McNeill’s (2019) possible two futures – a dystopic ‘mass supervision’ of untrammelled techno-corrections, or a community-oriented probation grounded in values of parsimony, proportionality and productiveness. The end of TR has brought probation back under state control, but under civil service management frameworks. This represents not only a continuation of marketising logic, but also – given the importance of social-structural critiques of inequality to traditional probation identities – a concerning development for professional autonomy in this field. Tidmarsh places hope in the reclamation of an occupational, not organisational professionalism and on the relationship between officer and offender, as crucial now as ever.

This book is sure to prove useful to researchers, academics and postgraduate students with an interest in probation. It will also be of interest to some working in the sociology of the professions, or concerned with the implications of Coalition-era public sector restructuring. It advances Foucauldian analysis of punishment, not just beyond the prison but applied to a relatively under-researched sector of the criminal justice workforce. Tidmarsh’s nuanced explication of marketisation and professionalism deepens our understanding of how justice policy plays out among people ‘on the ground’. Theoretically sophisticated and rich in empirical detail, *Professionalism in Probation: Making Sense of Marketisation* is an impressive monograph.

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