

Weighing the relative advantages of prisons, however, rather precluded a systemic critique of the prison system. This was further indicated by her attempts to employ incarceration figures as evidence of women's moral superiority; the press reported that she said of the penitentiary in Philadelphia, 'there are 1,400 men prisoners there and only 28 women. Now, isn't that another good argument for woman's suffrage?'<sup>8</sup> Moreover, she made this point on more than one occasion; in Milwaukee the following year she observed: 'We hear much about the inability of women to vote rightly. At least they seem to be able to keep out of the house of correction about twenty times and a fraction as well as men.'<sup>9</sup>

It was an argument that could easily be appropriated by elitists, evidenced by WSPU propaganda that upheld women's claim for citizenship by contrasting examples of civic-minded women with male types cast as *unfit* for citizenship. Sylvia's closer approximation to an elitist approach on the issue of prisons is further revealed by comparison with her approach to women at work. Whereas Sylvia's research in this period and experience of working women's collective action developed into a conviction that working women required representation to work out their own salvation, she did not see a way in which imprisoned women could achieve this and looked instead to reforming middle-class women.

The implications of this approach are demonstrated here by Sylvia's glowing description of the reformatory for women at Bedford Hills in New York State. Under the direction of Katherine Bement Davis, it rejected a punitive model of imprisonment. Seeking instead to understand the reasons that women were incarcerated, it aimed to treat, rehabilitate and train prisoners so that they might be able to more successfully integrate into society. In its focus on bettering the individual, the Bedford Hills regime provided a stark contrast with the inhuman and degrading treatment of women prisoners at Holloway and Sylvia responded warmly to this model. In this chapter, Sylvia demonstrates considerable knowledge about the new scheme that Davis was embarked upon to psychologically, and therefore 'scientifically', categorise inmates with a view to separating those deemed to suffer from 'congenital' defects. John D. Rockefeller Jr., then heading an investigation into prostitution, invested in this scheme which could see women judged by class and gendered prejudices, subjected to lifelong custodial sentences and sterilised.<sup>10</sup> Although it is unlikely Sylvia was aware of the full implications of the scheme, she uncritically accepted Davis's justification of complete institutional dominance over the inmates as a benevolent

and scientific innovation. The skilful critique she was developing of the 'scientific' control of workers through Taylorism and efficiency is notably absent here.



## PRISONERS

'Does it pay to be polite?

B 4059, 2, 10.3, 10.

'Yes sir: It pays to be polite, person with polish manners are honored from every body. I try to be as polite as I could, but for some reasons I'm not polite as I like to be; and this is the biggest reason because I cannot use it the English language in the proper way. Among my own people 'Lithuanians' I have a name as delicate boy, but Americans generally making fun of me because I cannot place it the words correctly, for that reason I'm not polite as I mean to be. But in this place polite are not in use, biggest half of the inmates do not know what the polite is. I have been with many cell mates that as more I try to be polite to them they more cursed me and call me all kinds of names, but if I curse, talking about big Robberyes and other evil things then I be all right.

I have nothing against the rules or officers but companions cell mates that makes my time miserable.

I often thought and thought no body paid attention at us forst timers, that we are mixed up with hard criminals, that nothing else but school for robberyes sodomiss and others worst crimes that can be commitit.

'Now I am going to stop writing i hope dear Teacher you understand my expressions.

Faithfully Yours.

B 4509.\*

The above is a composition exercise written by an inmate of the Eastern Penitentiary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In this prison there were 29

\* All spelling mistakes here are in Sylvia's original transcription. The number 10.3, 10 likely relates to the date of the composition; if the numbering follows the standard American format (month-day-year), that would indicate the piece was written six months before Sylvia's visit.