

Prison life: Thomas Middelhoff is not the only one suffering

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Why does it take high profile cases like those of businessman Thomas Middelhoff or football manager Uli Hoeneß to get the public interested in the inner workings of German prisons? Wouldn't it be nice if this interest was born of something other than voyeurism? Wouldn't it be nice, too, if the concern extended to the fates of less well-known detainees – the tens of thousands of prisoners being held in prison, many of them on remand awaiting trial. Rarely is attention paid to conditions in other closed institutions such as nursing homes, care centers or psychiatric wards. It takes a spectacular case to get people to take notice. So I want to make use of this rare opportunity.

The case of Uli Hoeneß generated a base appetite for details from the tabloids. How big is his cell? Is he getting any special treatment? Is he allowed to watch his team FC Bayern play their Champions League games even though they are on at night? Those who were keen to defend Hoeneß for his accomplishments and protect him from these media attacks were less inclined to look in more detail at the conditions in Bavarian detention centers and at the other detainees, though they too deserve our attention. Empathy was something they felt only for the prisoner they had heard of.

Why did most people fail to pose the fundamental questions raised by these cases? What is the purpose of prison sentences in general – and in particular in the case of someone as well integrated into society as Hoeneß? Have we resorted here to a kind of punishment automatism? Does prison not do more harm than good – to the individual without a doubt, but perhaps also to the society in whose name the sentence is handed down?

Nobody asked these questions. The spotlight that was briefly aimed on the penal system was not, sadly, a beacon of enlightenment. Those who aren't interested in questioning the purpose of the institution as a whole should perhaps look more closely at the fact that the conditions in German prisons – to say nothing of the much worse conditions elsewhere – are far from suited to ensuring that the people detained within eventually emerge as better, reformed citizens.

Why, instead, do we have a system in which detainees consider themselves lucky when the damage wreaked by their prison spell – loss of family and friends, career and social decline, harm to physical and mental health – is not too grave? No, these questions are never asked.

In the case of Thomas Middelhoff there has at least been some discussion of the psychological and physical damage inflicted by his detention. As a suicide prevention measure, the light in his cell was turned on every 15 minutes for 28 days, making it impossible, according to his lawyers, for him to sleep. It should be beyond dispute that this kind of treatment is inhumane. Yet the real scandal is that it takes the case of a celebrity like Middelhoff to bring to public attention a practice which, according to the head of the regional criminal justice trade union, is applied on average to 20 to 30 detainees at any given time in this one prison alone.

A further question is raised by Middelhoff's case and by the many other similar cases: why should someone sentenced to three years in prison, who is on his first conviction and who has

appealed his sentence, be held in prison on remand for five months? Even if the original sentence is upheld, it is likely that only half or a third of it will be served and even then under open prison conditions. Why is someone like this being held on remand for five months?

There is no good reason for this or the similar fates of many others on remand. We should get no pleasure, no sly satisfaction, from watching others fall, even if we don't particularly like them or their business dealings. I hope that both of them have their freedom restored as soon as possible and more generally I hope that their experiences will prompt them to show solidarity for those in similar situations who are not famous, who do not have access to top lawyers and the media, and whose fate tends to be generally ignored.