

The Ethnography of Prisons and Penal Confinement*

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Keywords

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Abstract

Centered on the ethnography of prisons and field research on penal confinement, this review maps out current developments and characterizes them in relation to key themes that shaped earlier approaches. Further internationalizing the ethnographic discussion on prisons by broadening the predominant focus on the United States and the English-speaking world, the review is organized around a main line of discussion: the prison–society relation and the articulation between intramural and extramural worlds. More or less apparent in field research, this articulation is addressed from different perspectives—within and across different scales and analytic frames—whether centered more on the workings of the institution or on prisoners and their social worlds, both within and outside walls. The porosity of prison boundaries, increasingly acknowledged, has also been problematized and ethnographically documented in different ways: from prison-in-context to interface approaches, both more reflexive and attuned to broader theoretical debates.

INTRODUCTION

Partly following up on Rhodes's (2001) *Annual Review of Anthropology* review of "the history, sociology and anthropology of the prison," this article centers on the ethnography of carceral institutions and field research on penal confinement. It maps out its contemporary developments and characterizes them in relation to the key themes, predominant theoretical debates, and methodological issues that shaped earlier, classic ethnographic approaches to the carceral world.

In agreement with Wacquant's proposition and previous contribution (2002) toward internationalizing the ethnographic discussion around the prison, this review broadens the hitherto predominantly narrow geographical focus on the United States, extending it also beyond the English-speaking world.¹ Widening the scope beyond US-centered studies is not simply a question of bringing to bear other realities, adding perspective, and mitigating the risks of parochialism (Ribeiro & Escobar 2006). Broadening the scope is also a matter of necessity insofar as it reflects, as Wacquant (2002) also notes, the "eclipse" of a rich tradition of prison ethnography in the United States and today's scarcity of "observational studies depicting the everyday world of inmates" (p. 385). This scarcity, although more recently mitigated, contrasts with the current situation in Europe and Latin America, where field researchers are more present in the carceral scene. A widened focus is not tantamount to providing a systematic world tour of prison ethnographic literature, which is not the purpose of this review and would not be viable in its format. Instead, this approach aims to contribute to a wider comparative landscape and to unified debates based on more diversified sources, which also embody the diversity of prison systems (for an overview, see King 2007; Ruggiero et al. 1995).

The focus on ground-level research does not imply a divorce between micro- and macrolevel approaches. On the contrary, to imply such an opposition would misconstrue much of the contemporary ethnographic research within the prison or around it. Such research combines different analytic scales and engages with the wider landscape of forms of power, state governance, and cultural and societal transformations. In turn, close-up observation of in-prison aspects illuminates external processes. In line with the more comprehensive perspective adopted in present-day ethnographies, this review thus also refers to historical, penological, and other strands of literature on punishment and society.

The review is built around a central theme that allows us to aggregate a variety of classic and contemporary studies in a relatively coherent overview and to highlight important shifts in focus and concerns in prison studies over time. The central theme is the prison–society nexus and the articulation between the internal and the external worlds. This articulation is addressed in several ways, whether more centered on the workings of the institution, on institutional agents and practices (examined in the first section), or instead more centered on prisoners and their social worlds, both within and outside prison walls (examined in the second and third sections). In both cases, these are descriptive-ethnographic foci and are not to be confounded with prison-centrism as an ideology endorsing prison itself (Chantraine 2013).

The term "prison" and the main body of field research discussed in this review concern penitentiaries and medium- to high-security establishments. Jails, "supermax," and "therapeutic" prisons present particularities that would require specific attention and have been the object of fewer on-the-ground approaches (e.g., Genders & Players 2010, Irwin 1985, Rhodes 2004).

¹A similar purpose was pursued in the symposium *Resisting the Eclipse: An International Symposium on Prison Ethnography* at the 2012 Conference of the International Centre for Comparative Criminological Research.

THE WORKINGS OF THE INSTITUTION

Contemporary ethnographic prison studies do not insulate their localized approach to penal confinement from macro- or mesolevel social, legal, and political forces. These forces are required to make sense of today's inflated prison populations, resulting from the rise in incarceration rates in most liberal democracies since the past three decades of the twentieth century. This rise was led by the exceptional hyperincarceration in the United States.²

Foucault (1977), who had not predicted this carceral boom and considered prison as an analyzer of society, as a condensed instance of a wider disciplinary rationality pervading society in a specific historical period, had also identified a subsequent historical shift: from a "disciplinary society" to a "security society" based on risk management (Foucault 2009). Since then, several scholars (e.g., Feeley & Simon 1992, Garland 2001, Simon 2007) have explored this new rationale. Its aim is no longer to change people but instead to keep danger at bay. It is not focused on correction but on defense and is more concerned with assessing, managing, and preventing risks than with redressing offenders' behavior or reintegrating those in the margins of society through welfare.

Although this rationality harbored a liberal critique to the excesses of coercive and intrusive disciplinary power, it also fitted well with punitive penal populism, in a growing culture of crime control that appealed to purely retributionist, incapacitating, and expressive punishment, devoid of rehabilitation goals. In a different vein, other social scientists (e.g., Beckett & Western 2001; Harcourt 2011; Wacquant 2008, 2009; Western 2006) have theorized the current penal expansion as mainly resulting from an increase in punishment rather than an increase in crime. Instead of analyzing the rise in imprisonment rates within a narrow criminological frame, seeking to connect it with fluctuations in crime rates, these researchers matched it with inequality, the neoliberal transformation of the state, and the regulation of postindustrial poverty. Market and labor deregulation coupled with shrinking social welfare, disciplinary social policies, and a stronger cultural emphasis on individual responsibility have converged to exacerbate social inequality in several countries and to deteriorate the social conditions of an urban precariat, whose problems and disorders are addressed by the penal system. And if "governing through crime" (Simon 2007) gains appeal in postindustrial societies, albeit to varying degrees, it is also because the state reasserts public authority mainly through the penal system (Wacquant 2008, 2009). Wacquant has thus deemed the prison as a key institution for a sociology of poverty regulation and for a historical anthropology of the state.

These broad interrelated tendencies have filtered down to the level of prison regimes themselves, as illustrated by field research discussed in this section. However, this research also exemplifies that the state should not be understood as a singular undifferentiated entity, with clear-cut boundaries and a consistent, uniform action. It is a diversified web of institutions, procedures, rationalities, and actors that coexist in a complex and sometimes contradictory manner (Bourdieu 1994, Ferguson & Gupta 2002, Lipsky 1980). The state can, in turn, be approached ethnographically through the workings of its institutions, where policies and practices meet and are also produced at the level of its agents' everyday activities.

Changing general trends can be identified in penal institutions, but they do not necessarily indicate a unified and coherent rationale. The focus on existing practices and daily routines can reveal composite layers from different penal eras. Postmodern prison programs can coexist with old modernist classifications and disciplinaries, alongside premodern modes of control such as

²See Walmsley (2013) for an overview. Behind this general trend in prison demography, there are nevertheless differences between US and European penal cultures and in the use of custodial confinement (Pratt 2002; Tonry 2004, 2007).

body searches, physical coercion, and neo-feudal acts of punishment such as deportations, public humiliation, and shaming procedures (Carlen & Tombs 2006, p. 356; Shearing 2001).

The rehabilitative ideal did not disappear with the punitive turn altogether, and neither did it decline to the same degree everywhere (Carrier 2010, Whitman 2003), even if it took on new forms. Some of its reconfigurations are especially noticeable in women's prisons. Carlen & Tombs (2006; see also Kendall & Pollack 2003, Hanna-Moffat 2001) have analyzed local implementations of a contemporary avatar of discipline, in the form of in-prison cognitive-behavioral programs that, contrary to classic disciplinary governance, no longer emerge within the confines of nation-states but instead emanate from a global market of penal products described as "reintegration industries." Fueled by the revival of psychological perspectives on crime and oblivious to adverse backgrounds or severe social situations faced by prisoners, these programs aim to reduce recidivism by redefining prisoners' predicaments as psychological problems in need of cognitive adjustments. Recent ethnographic research has also identified a similar tendency in community-based institutions for the correctional treatment of women offenders (Haney 2010).

Disciplines can therefore resurface in this commodified remix of treatment and punishment. They can also reemerge in a purely moral idiom of individual and family values (e.g., the discourses of rehabilitation in South African postapartheid prisons analyzed by Gillespie 2008). But previous disciplinary techniques, such as work and surveillance, have been noted to lose disciplinary content and to acquire new meanings. More than acting on prisoners' dispositions, including regularity and self-control, prison work can be viewed by prisoners and administrators as a right that ensures the means for prisoners to purchase consumer goods, which becomes all the more important as prison populations are increasingly poor (Cunha 2002, Faugeron 1996, Marchetti 2002). More than reenacting a panoptical essence in its most refined expression, where permanent monitoring was meant to produce "docile bodies," the sophistication of technological surveillance can be directed, above all, at maximizing security (Santoro 2005). Supermax custody takes the control over prisoners through monitoring and other devices to the extreme (Rhodes 2004).

The foci on rehabilitation and punishment can also resurface recombined with, or transformed by, the postmodern emphasis on risk management through a managerialized and, like other globalized policies, standardized approach. Accordingly, notions of risk as social deprivation give way to an idea of risk as dangerousness. Rehabilitation interventions centered on prisoners' needs are redefined by the assessment and management of the risk they may pose for public security, together with a postdisciplinary stress on prisoners' individual responsibility and a volitionist emphasis on their autonomous capacity of choice as moral agents (Bosworth 2007, Hanna-Moffat 2001).

This redefinition of the institution's mission can be illustrated by the shift in the recruitment pool, the ethos, and the practices of noncorrectional prison staff—now probation officers—from social work to the legal-criminological field, richly ethnographed in two French carceral institutions by Bouagga (2012). Bouagga also showed that, rather than revealing a single system-wide intention, the carceral field was spanned by multiple positions and different tendencies, embedded in concrete social relations and in the work of frontline personnel, within various specific constraints, occupational cultures, subjectivities, and moral configurations. Likewise, detailed field studies have described the contradictions and moral tensions involved in the daily practices of institutional agents and how new modes of governance, such as managerialism, focused on organizational performance, measurable processes, administrative efficacy, and cost-effectiveness, combine with local circumstances to produce specific effects at the institutional level (e.g., Bennett et al. 2008, Carrabine 2004, Chauvenet et al. 1994, Cheliotis 2006, Crawley 2004, Liebling & Arnold 2004).

Accountability in today's carceral institutions is not, however, limited to an economic dimension; it is also endowed with a moral meaning. As a coercive institution, the prison incurs a fundamental suspicion of illegitimacy within a framework of human rights that sets limits on punishment and has periodically inspired prison reforms in most liberal democracies. Expectations of decency, respect for prisoners' dignity and rights, and humanization in carceral treatment—also part of a liberal ethics of power—have motivated guidelines and standards regarding living conditions, prisoners' basic opportunities, and entitlement. Field studies and ethnographic approaches suggest that, rather than dismiss this orientation as a mere front disguising the deleterious effects of imprisonment and the severity of coercive treatment inspired by a punitive political atmosphere, it is more productive to examine the concrete modalities by which this orientation coexists with other, contradictory forces within the institution; how it is implemented or recedes in specific circumstances; and how formal guarantees are not enough to ensure fairness and equity. It may even compound structural inequality for those prisoners lacking the resources or the cultural skills to “play the game” in terms of the institutional expectations placed on them, especially in a more codified, bureaucratized environment (e.g., Bouagga 2012, Crewe 2009, Cunha 2002, Lieblich & Arnold 2004).³ However, the formalization of various daily procedures and interactions—from control to communication and decision making—moderates and contains the excesses of institutional power insofar as it contributes to minimize overt discrimination and provides prisoners with the means to challenge blatant arbitrariness (Cheliotis 2006, Easton 2011).

There is thus a long-term tendency across liberal democracies toward the moralization of the institution through the humanization of prison regimes and a stricter regulation of coercive power. Aspects of this tendency are also known as “normalization,” a notion that when applied to prison, rather than prisoners, is devoid of its Foucauldian disciplinarian connotations and that has entered the lexicon of prison officials in several European countries with an entirely different meaning. In these settings, the term refers to the prison as one among many institutions that provide a public service and as a “normal” subsystem of society. Prisons should thus aim to reduce the gap between the inside and the outside worlds and to mirror free society in central aspects of human existence (from civic to sexual aspects) (Leander 1995, Snacken 2002). This orientation therefore challenges a “less eligibility” principle, which inversely advocates the permanence of prisons below mainstream society standards in order to remain aversive and deterrent (Easton 2011, Sieh 1989). Normalization has been implemented in varied forms and degrees, in chronic tension with less eligibility and within the limits variably set by security concerns, which tend to prevail in carceral institutions.

Normalization can be reflected in several practices, whether at the level of individual prisoners, considered in their personal and social identities, or at the level of the institution and the services available. In the first case, normalization can consist in maintaining prisoners' previous identities rather than replacing them with a number or a prison uniform. In the second case, it consists in sustaining, rather than reducing, access to education, health, and training, as well as other aspects such as intimate conjugal visits or voting rights (Easton 2011, Snacken 2002).⁴ This access is not strictly intramural. Normalization can be based on a wider perspective of prisoners' social inclusion and citizenship integration, upholding their rights not only as prisoners but as full citizens. As such, it can include institutional actions to promote prisoners' access to general social benefits,

³At a broader level, but parallel to these intrainstitutional coexistences between apparently opposite tendencies, Gottschalk (2006) showed how the severity of punishment and the punitive turn that resulted in hyperincarceration in the United States occurred in the aftermath of prison reforms intended to improve prisoners' rights.

⁴Unlike the United States (Mele & Miller 2005), most European countries and other democracies do not disenfranchise felons, and prisoners continue to participate in the political system by exercising voting rights.

health care coverage, and social security.⁵ It also entails a closer integration with other sectors of public administration and a stronger articulation with other public or private entities to provide goods and services no longer organized within a separate prison sector.

This close integration, which has rendered prison walls more permeable at various levels, also concerns modes of regulation and outside scrutiny that limit the local margins of discretion of carceral institutions. Their normative order has been relocated at higher levels, not only at the national level but also at transnational and supranational levels.⁶ Prison regimes, timetables, and daily rules are no longer decided entirely at the local level of confinement settings, but instead follow centralized orientations. Procedural scrutiny and organizational oversight by the upper echelons of both prison and nonprison authorities, centralization and bureaucratization of institutional decision making, and formalization of guidelines and standardization of procedures have also shifted the locus of power and authority. They have resulted in a tighter frame, reshaping the action of prison staff and managers, and, indirectly, prisoners' social configurations. Given the more limited latitude to interpret and implement prison rules, correctional management is less prone to reflect prison governors' personal styles and idiosyncrasies, but it is also less inclined to negotiate order with informal parallel structures of authority among prisoners, for example by co-opting prisoner leaders to institutional governance. Instead, together with the institutional stress on individual responsibility and self-regulation, this correctional frame contributes to individualize the prisoner community (Adler & Longhurst 1994, Barak-Glanz 1981, Bryan 2007, Crewe 2009, Cunha 2002, Liebling & Arnold 2004, Sparks et al. 1996).⁷ Ethnographic accounts of prisons in the Global South have pointed nevertheless to a coexistence of formalization and informalization processes in institutional governance (e.g., Barbosa 2007, Castro e Silva 2011, Garces et al. 2013).

The aspects described above denote a relative decline of closed, authoritarian institutional regimes; a narrowing gap between prisons and mainstream society in terms of standards and living conditions; and an increasing number of goods, services, and communications (Jewkes 2002) that flow through prisons. And it is precisely on the grounds of these aspects that the present relevance of the Goffmanian model of the prison as a "total institution" (Goffman 1961) has been most commonly challenged (e.g., Chantraine 2004, Davies 1989, Lemire & Vacheret 2007, Farrington 1992).

THE PRISON BEYOND WALLS

Field studies have looked beyond the institution's physical walls in yet other ways. Focusing on the peri-carceral space of the institution, one type of ethnographic inquiry examines the exchanges with the proximate sociospatial environment surrounding carceral settings, especially how the effects of the prison's penal stigma project onto its immediate spatial vicinity. Social ecology studies conducted around French penitentiaries are one example. They shed light on the practices

⁵See for example the normalization processes in French penal institutions under the lexicon of "entering common rights" (*faire rentrer dans le droit commun*) (Bouagga 2012).

⁶See the European Prison Rules, which have, since 1987, detailed formal guidelines for the prison administrations of the European Council member states and the actions of the European Court of Human Rights (van Zyl Smit & Snacken 2009).

⁷This type of interaction between formal and informal authority structures tends rather to occur within an authoritarian discretionary model of management. Two of the models of correctional management identified by Barak-Glanz (1981) in the United States are also relevant in the history of European penal institutions: the authoritarian model and the bureaucratic-lawful model (see also Vakhovine 2004 for the former Soviet republics). The latter has gradually prevailed on both sides of the Atlantic. Prison ethnographies have shown how these shifts have deeply shaped contemporary prison life on different interrelated levels (e.g., Crewe 2009, Cunha 2002).

of social relegation and symbolic distancing that take place in the “sensitive perimeter” of the prison (Combessie 2002; see also Marchetti & Combessie 1996, Renouard 1999), reinforcing a cleavage that marks it off from free society. Sabaini’s (2011) rich ethnography documenting the social absorption of two penitentiaries by a Brazilian town provides another example.

In a different vein, other approaches have focused on the social and relational perimeters of the prison and have closely characterized how incarceration shapes and affects prisoners’ families, partners, and communities. This social perimeter can include transnational relations, as shown in those ethnographed by Bumachar (2012) and Padovani (2013) in Spanish and Brazilian prisons.

Reaching beyond incarcerated individuals and capturing the collective dimension of imprisonment beyond prison walls, these approaches have become even more important as the rise of incarceration rates revealed a disproportionate concentration of prisoners from ethnic-racial minorities and impoverished communities (Patillo et al. 2004, Wacquant 2013, Western 2006). High levels of concentrated incarceration have resulted in the ubiquity of prison as an existence woven into the fabric of poor urban neighborhoods, where the lives of residents and families are pervaded by the prison system’s inescapable presence, with specific community-level depleting effects ranging from social to economic, civic and political (e.g., Braman 2004, Clear 2007, Clear et al. 2001, Cunha 2008, Patillo et al. 2004, Ugger & Manze 2004). Ethnographic studies have also shown how mass imprisonment and hyperincarceration have reshaped kinship and neighborhood networks and how they have affected informal structures of social support (Cunha 2013).

Closing up the lens on prisoners’ loved ones on the outside, an important body of field research has illuminated the “extended carceral experience” (Touraut 2012), which includes the challenges and difficulties—financial, social, emotional—faced by prisoners’ families and partners during imprisonment as well as the material, moral, and emotional support they bring to prisoners themselves [for an overview, see Mills & Codd (2007), Patillo et al. (2004), Travis & Waul (2003)]. Assumptions that incarceration fuels disruption or causes the breakdown of interpersonal ties have been nuanced by in-depth ethnographic inquiries, which have also complicated recurring analysis of the gains or losses that families and prisoners experience. Touraut (2012) in France and Comfort (2008) in the United States, for example, have illustrated how experiences can be diverse depending on interpersonal and socioeconomic circumstances, how relationships maintained during incarceration can be ridden with ambivalence, and how both individuals and relationships are reconfigured by incarceration.

Comfort (2008) described the “secondary prisonization” of women with incarcerated partners, a process of socialization to carceral norms and subjection to penal control that induces them to rely on the correctional authorities as the most consistent public institution available to them. She showed a coexistence of disintegrative and integrative effects of incarceration and described how prison becomes a distorted but manageable substitute site for domestic and conjugal life. Shielded from violent behavior and home turmoil, women can sustain with some measure of control otherwise problematic relationships. They also find identity gains in reinscribing themselves in the gendered roles of nurturer and caregiver.

Other ethnographies (e.g., Cunha & Granja 2014 in Portugal; Palomar Vereá 2007 in Mexico) have identified a similar process of reconfiguration in the case of incarcerated women and parent-child relationships. Mothers’ separation from their children may be a constant source of stress and generate feelings of being a “bad mother.” But imprisonment also allows inmate mothers to redefine problematic mother-child relationships in a different venue. Moreover, in correctional facilities where inmate mothers can keep their infant children with them, the prison environment may allow women to experience motherhood in new ways, creating new subjectivities through which mothers in turn resignify previous experiences of maternity. Sheltered from the pressures

of everyday survival, poverty, and violence, with time available to dedicate to their children—who also start to receive medical and psychological expert attention—they may experience with unprecedented intensity a bond with them, endowing it with a meaning that takes center stage in their lives from then on. In such a context, motherhood becomes hyperbolized in narratives of personal identity. In both of these cases—conjugal and parental relationships under the shadow of the prison—these lesser-known distorting effects of incarceration are not unrelated to the fact that the penal institution has also become a “peculiar social service” for managing problems unaddressed by other means and institutions, especially at a time of retrenchment of the welfare state (Comfort 2008).

PRISONERS' SOCIAL AND SUBJECTIVE WORLD

A rich and ongoing tradition of prison ethnography, more prisoner-centered, has explored the prisoners' social and subjective world behind bars, from its cultural forms, social relations, and structures, to the forms of power, adaptation, and resistance deployed in the specific moral and material world of confinement institutions. These aspects have been approached with different degrees of interconnectedness. The notions of “prison culture” and “prisoner society,” and the ethnographic attention devoted to the inner world of carceral institutions, gained currency in the aftermath of Clemmer's (1940) theory of prisonization, a process of socialization into inmate values that, according to Clemmer, would hinder rehabilitation. Sykes (1958) and Sykes & Messinger (1960) shifted the focus from prisonization to the culture itself, a system of values and norms in the form of injunctions (“do's” and “don'ts”) guiding prisoners' behavior and defining typical social roles that could be found across diverse prison populations.⁸ They theorized prison culture as a collective response to obviate an array of material and moral deprivations entailed by imprisonment, thus as a mechanism with roots in prison itself. Irwin & Cressey (1962) would later argue that although inmate culture and society provided a means to cope with imprisonment, it was not generated by prison-specific properties but was instead a coalescence of external subcultures imported into the prison.

Since this first formulation of the “deprivation-importation” debate discussing the endogenous or exogenous basis of prison culture and social life, and which continues to reverberate in more or less integrated versions of the two models in present-day literature (e.g., Crewe 2009, Harvey 2007, Trammell 2012), it was thus the prisoner community itself—in addition to institutional power—that gradually ceased to be considered a self-contained system. And although at its early stages both sides of the debate converged in their common recognition of a relatively unified community, stabilized by a single specific cultural form regardless of its origins (see Irwin 1970), the prisoner community would, in later years, be described as fragmented into mutually hostile factions, with their own normative codes to which only their members were bound. These were factions divided along ethnic-minority lines, gang membership, and violent groups from the street drug economy (e.g., Carroll 1974; Colvin 1992; Fleisher 1989; Irwin 1980, 2005; Jacobs 1977).

External structural conditions, as well as cultural conditions, therefore became more present in ethnographic accounts of the prisoner community and of its permeability to the outside world. Still, external worlds integrated these accounts mostly as background, as the previous context that molded prisoners' moral world and cultural forms, and affected the prison's social structure.

⁸Despite this recurrence, ethnographic accounts around the same period showed a less uniform in-prison cultural landscape (see studies below on women's prisons and Mathiesen's (1965) account on a Norwegian prison).

But the carceral copresence of gang members, affiliates from the streets, “mates,” “road dogs,” “homeboys,” or “homegirls” (Carroll 1974, Díaz-Cotto 1996, Fleisher 1989, Irwin 1980, Jacobs 1974, Morris & Morris 1963), although undertheorized at the time, also meant that prison walls did not entirely cut prisoners from their social worlds; instead, segments of this world were also transposed into prison and continued to back previous social identities.

Later, phenomena of concentrated incarceration that tightly interlocked carceral institutions and lower-class, heavily penalized communities, observed in the United States and in other countries (e.g., Barbosa 2006, Biondi 2010, Clear 2007, Cunha 2002, 2010, Wacquant 2013), further challenged the boundaries of the prison as a micro social scene. Cunha’s ethnographic revisit (2002, 2008) of a women’s prison in Portugal showed how carceral sociality ceased to be self-referential and became an extension of some urban neighborhoods. Its course became tightly bound to the flow of everyday life outside through the ramifying networks that connected prisoners both among themselves and to external overlapping circles of kin, friends, and neighbors. These constellations transformed the experience of confinement and synchronized prison temporality with the rhythms of the outside world. Unlike her previous “prison-in-context” type of ethnography in the same institution, the author was led to shift the ethnographic focus from the prison to the interface mediating the inside and the outside, the prison and the neighborhood, to capture the new translocality of carceral social life. Highlighting not only the porosity of institutional prison boundaries (see first section, above), but also a more subterranean porosity in prisoners’ social world, this type of approach expands the break with Goffmanian-type depictions of the prison as “a world apart” (see also Bandyopadhyay 2010, Crewe 2009).

REFLEXIVITY IN PRISON FIELD RESEARCH

The interlocking of inside and outside worlds at multiple levels raises new methodological questions about the boundaries of the prison as a site of field inquiry. The political and practical conditions of the production of prison field research also continue to deserve consideration. Depending on the funding entities, the research design itself may be predetermined by policy-driven and utilitarian agendas or may pursue more autonomous and theoretically driven concerns. In a closed, coercive environment, the issue of accessibility is paramount for the viability of in-depth, long-term ethnographic research, which by definition includes not only scheduled interviews and narratives, but also serendipitous, nonelicited data provided by close-up, unstructured observation and informal conversations. “Quasi-ethnography” is a justified expression given that fieldworkers’ access to carceral settings with little or no institutional filters is rare in international prison research (Rhodes 2001, Wacquant 2002, Waldram 2009). There is, however, a nonnegligible number of present-day ethnographies, especially on European prisons, which have benefited from full, unrestricted, and unconditioned access to prisoners and prison premises (e.g., Crewe 2009; Cunha 2002, 2008; Rowe 2011; Ugelvik 2012).

In addition to specific exploration of ethnographic avenues and qualitative techniques in carceral contexts, such as interviewing (e.g., Davies 2000, Jenness 2010, Sutton 2011), life stories, self-narratives, and autoethnography (Crewe & Maruna 2006, Jewkes 2012), prison field research has also reflectively addressed its own situatedness. Prison ethnographers have problematized their own social location in terms of ethnicity, gender, class, and age (Phillips & Earle 2010); their overt or covert role as researcher (Cohen & Taylor 1972); the actual or imputed position as prisoner (Kaminski 2004, Spedding 1999),⁹ guard (Fleisher 1989, Marquart 1986), visitor (Biondi

⁹For prisoners’ participatory experiences in research processes, see Bosworth et al. (2005).

2010), student, and social worker (Le Caisne 2000); and other forms of identity management (King & Wincup 2000).

This explicit awareness also concerns fieldworkers' relationships with their interlocutors, emotional and intellectual engagement, intimacy and detachment, and navigation of the relationships between different groups and power structures (Liebling 2001, Nielsen 2010, Sloan & Drake 2013, Sparks 2002; see also King & Wincup 2000). Other than simply confessional, these aspects can be sociologically folded into the process through which ethnographers come to understand the dynamics of the carceral world they study (Rhodes 2001). Even the much commented position of the prison ethnographer as an outsider does not preclude his/her absorption into this dynamic. His/her exteriority can also illuminate it, whether being an outsider hinders or facilitates social rapport or does both, in different moments and circumstances (Cunha 1994, 2002).

An awareness of the historicity and cultural context of the ethnographic inquiry broadens the scope of reflexivity. It allows for a more grounded and systematic articulation between individual, intersubjective, social, and institutional aspects, providing a comparative background against which separate assumptions related to these aspects can be (re)assessed. Ethnographic revisits of the same carceral site—combined or not with cross-institutional comparisons (e.g., Cunha 2002, Genders & Players 2010, Kruttschnitt & Gartner 2005, Liebling 2013)—capture change, but temporal context also allows researchers to more accurately identify specific properties of carceral situations, as well as the nature of the factors that shape them.

Prison ethnographies conducted in cultural contexts besides Anglo-American ones, where the dominant framing of prison studies occurred, show how different cultural varieties of incarceration can combine with globalized forms of penal power. They also contribute to a comparative understanding of the fusing of prison-specific and culture-specific aspects of carceral worlds (Bandyopadhyay 2010; Bandyopadhyay et al. 2013; Garces et al. 2013; Piacentini 2004, 2007; Reed 2004). In a related vein, a diversified prison ethnographic landscape can enhance reflexivity in terms of the categories used in ethnographic analysis. Categories of race/ethnicity, to name one example, are highly variable cultural constructs—and variable social and administrative classifications—that cannot be imported without precaution from, say, US contexts to Iberian or postcolonial Latin American ones.¹⁰ Examining the contextual meanings of race/ethnicity as categories of identity and social organization in a Portuguese prison, Cunha (2002, 2010), for example, noted that these categories had specific contours and could not simply be described in terms of their relative unimportance when compared with US prisons. In the external environment, these categories were also differently shaped by a specific interplay with class, mediated by such conditions as the neighborhood and the specific form of the Portuguese retail drug economy. Other ethnographies in European prisons have also shown how locality, cultural background, religion, and commonalities of experience supersede race/ethnicity in prison social life, even when they appear to coincide with ethno-racial alignments (Crewe 2009, Genders & Players 1989, Khosrokhavar 2004, Phillips & Earle 2010).

Prison field approaches have reflected general theoretical debates on race/ethnicity, class, gender, and the intersections between them. Gender, however, has informed prison research in a distinct manner depending on whether it focused on men's or women's prisons. Research on men's prisons is no longer oblivious to gender and has come to acknowledge this dimension, especially regarding the ideologies of masculinity that shape prison culture (Newton 1994, Sabo et al. 2001). Research on women's prisons, however, has tended to be more gender-bound as a whole.

¹⁰This caution is all the more necessary as the increased penalization of perceived others is affecting the prison landscape in different continents (Wacquant 2013).

The analytic angle of gender has dominated most research issues: from the gendered nature of prison regimes (whether based on normative femininity and domesticity or more gender-neutral; Bosworth 1999, Carlen 1983, Kruttschnitt & Gartner 2005, McCorkel 2003, Miller & Carbone-Lopez 2013), prison cultures, socialities, and “pains of imprisonment” (predicated on gender roles and identities and contrasted with their male equivalents; Giallombardo 1966, Heffernan 1972, Walker & Worrall 2000, Ward & Kassebaum 1965, Zaitzow & Thomas 2003), to issues of representation (the conundrums of representing women as victims and/or agents; Fili 2013).

This more gender-centric agenda is nevertheless increasingly diversified for both theoretical and empirical reasons. These involve recognition of the diversity of women prisoners’ experiences and identities and attention to a wider variety of aspects of carceral life, but also changes inside and outside prison walls and contextual shifts in the actual saliency of gender as a category of identity and social life in women’s prisons (Boutron & Constant 2013, Cunha & Granja 2014, Greer 2000, Mandaraka-Sheppard 1986, Owen 1998, Rowe 2011).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Prison–society relations and the articulation between the internal and the external worlds have been more or less apparent in ground-level inquiries of the carceral world. These relations have been examined from different perspectives within and across different scales and analytic frames. From an institution-centered perspective, field researchers have approached the relation of prisons with the world beyond its walls, focusing on the external influences that bear upon confinement institutions and specifically upon institutional enactments of coercive power. Broader shifts in rationalities, governmentality, and punishment policies, as well as the relocation of the normative basis and locus of authority to levels superseding individual institutions, have affected how institutional power is exerted, which in turn shapes prisoners’ experiences of incarceration. The narrowing of the gap between prisons and mainstream society in standards and living conditions and the influx of goods, services, and communications that flow through these institutions have also been the object of on-the-ground research. This institutional porosity in terms of modes of provision, regulation, and scrutiny dismisses a view of the carceral world as autarchic, closed, and self-sufficient. It also reveals the growing complexity of contemporary modes of the exercise of power, a complexity that can include the coexistence of contradictory practices and rationalities.

In addition to this examination of the institution-in-context, that is, in light of macro- or meso-level conditions that shape institutional power and the workings of the institution, the permeability of prison boundaries has been problematized and documented ethnographically in several ways. Other prison-in-context approaches, centered on the prisoner community, highlight this permeability in terms of the previous external environments that shape prisoners’ identities, moral worlds, cultural forms, and social structures behind bars.

Whether centered on the intramural life of prisoners or on the extramural life of their families, partners, and communities, “interface” approaches have shifted in different ways the ethnographic focus to the juncture of both social worlds and have shed light on their mutual effects, as well as on their mutual constitution in times of massive, concentrated incarceration that disproportionately affects particular categories of people. In the case of prison field studies, these approaches capture more subterranean porosities and problematize the boundaries of the carceral setting as a micro-social scene that became translocal.

Closer attention to prison–society relations and a growing acknowledgment of the porosity of what was once depicted as a closed, bounded universe reflect macro- and microlevel shifts in empirical realities. However, this attention is also attuned to shifts in broader theoretical debates, where aspects of flow or closure (Meyer & Geschiere 1998) are more or less emphasized. Prison

field research has also embodied broader debates by becoming more reflexively aware of the manifold conditions of its own production.

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Contents

Perspectives

Looking Back, Looking Ahead
Jane H. Hill 1

A Conversation with Paul Friedrich
Paul Friedrich and Dale Pesmen 15

Archaeology

The Archaeology of Crafts Learning: Becoming a Potter in the
Puebloan Southwest
Patricia L. Crown 71

Networks of Power in Archaeology
Edward M. Schortman 167

Monastic and Church Archaeology
Roberta Gilchrist 235

The Archaeology of Ethnogenesis
T.M. Weik 291

The Archaeology of Urban Landscapes
Monica L. Smith 307

The Archaeology of Death: Mortuary Archaeology in the United
States and Europe 1990–2013
Bettina Arnold and Robert J. Jeske 325

Biological Anthropology

Primate Taxonomy: Inflation or Real?
Colin P. Groves 27

The Importance of Development for Comparative Primatology
Kim A. Bard and David A. Leavens 183

Adaptation to High Altitude: Phenotypes and Genotypes
Cynthia M. Beall 251

Stable Isotope Analyses and the Evolution of Human Diets <i>Margaret J. Schoeninger</i>	413
Linguistics and Communicative Practices	
Anthropology and Voice <i>Amanda Weidman</i>	37
Imitation <i>Michael Lempert</i>	379
Semiotic Dimensions of Creativity <i>Eitan Wilf</i>	397
Citational Practices: Knowledge, Personhood, and Subjectivity <i>Jane E. Goodman, Matt Tomlinson, and Justin B. Richland</i>	449
Interviewing: Practice, Ideology, Genre, and Intertextuality <i>Michèle Koven</i>	499
International Anthropology and Regional Studies	
Anthropology, China, and the Chinese Century <i>Frank N. Pieke</i>	123
World Anthropologies: Anthropological Cosmopolitanisms and Cosmopolitics <i>Gustavo Lins Ribeiro</i>	483
Sociocultural Anthropology	
Secrecy <i>Graham M. Jones</i>	53
Neoliberalism <i>Tejaswini Ganti</i>	89
On the Verge of Death: Visions of Biological Vulnerability <i>Carlo Caduff</i>	105
Sexual Violence and Its Discontents <i>Pratiksha Baxi</i>	139
Native American DNA: Ethical, Legal, and Social Implications of an Evolving Concept <i>Jessica Bardill</i>	155
Selective Reproductive Technologies <i>Tine M. Gammeltoft and Ayo Wablberg</i>	201
The Ethnography of Prisons and Penal Confinement <i>Manuela Cunha</i>	217

Transnational Humanitarianism	
<i>Miriam Ticktin</i>	273
Informed Consent: The Politics of Intent and Practice in Medical Research Ethics	
<i>Klaus Hoeyer and Linda F. Hogle</i>	347
Ethnographies of Encounter	
<i>Lieba Faier and Lisa Rofel</i>	363
Health, Risk, and Resilience: Interdisciplinary Concepts and Applications	
<i>Catherine Panter-Brick</i>	431
The Anthropology of Money and Finance: Between Ethnography and World History	
<i>Keith Hart and Horacio Ortiz</i>	465
Theme 1: Risk	
Secrecy	
<i>Graham M. Jones</i>	53
On the Verge of Death: Visions of Biological Vulnerability	
<i>Carlo Caduff</i>	105
Sexual Violence and Its Discontents	
<i>Pratiksha Baxi</i>	139
The Ethnography of Prisons and Penal Confinement	
<i>Manuela Cunha</i>	217
Informed Consent: The Politics of Intent and Practice in Medical Research Ethics	
<i>Klaus Hoeyer and Linda F. Hogle</i>	347
Imitation	
<i>Michael Lempert</i>	379
Health, Risk, and Resilience: Interdisciplinary Concepts and Applications	
<i>Catherine Panter-Brick</i>	431
Theme 2: Knowledge	
Primate Taxonomy: Inflation or Real?	
<i>Colin P. Groves</i>	27
On the Verge of Death: Visions of Biological Vulnerability	
<i>Carlo Caduff</i>	105

Networks of Power in Archaeology <i>Edward M. Schortman</i>	167
Informed Consent: The Politics of Intent and Practice in Medical Research Ethics <i>Klaus Hoeyer and Linda F. Hogle</i>	347
Semiotic Dimensions of Creativity <i>Eitan Wilf</i>	397
World Anthropologies: Anthropological Cosmopolitanisms and Cosmopolitics <i>Gustavo Lins Ribeiro</i>	483

Indexes

Cumulative Index of Contributing Authors, Volumes 34–43	521
Cumulative Index of Article Titles, Volumes 34–43	525

Errata

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TABLE OF CONTENTS FOR VOLUME 1:

- *Advances in Dialectometry*, Martijn Wieling, John Nerbonne
- *Bilingualism, Mind, and Brain*, Judith F. Kroll, Paola E. Dussias, Kinsey Bice, Lauren Perrotti
- *Bringing Machine Learning and Compositional Semantics Together*, Percy Liang, Christopher Potts
- *Correlational Studies in Typological and Historical Linguistics*, D. Robert Ladd, Seán G. Roberts, Dan Dediu
- *Cross-Linguistic Temporal Reference*, Judith Tonhauser
- *Diachronic Semantics*, Ashwini Deo
- *Ditransitive Constructions*, Martin Haspelmath
- *Events and Situations*, Sandro Zucchi
- *Genetics and the Language Sciences*, Simon E. Fisher, Sonja C. Vernes
- *How Nature Meets Nurture: Universal Grammar and Statistical Learning*, Jeffrey Lidz, Annie Gagliardi
- *Language Abilities in Neanderthals*, Sverker Johansson
- *Quotation and Advances in Understanding Syntactic Systems*, Alexandra D'Arcy
- *Semantics and Pragmatics of Argument Alternations*, Beth Levin
- *Sign Language Typology: The Contribution of Rural Sign Languages*, Connie de Vos, Roland Pfau
- *Suppletion: Some Theoretical Implications*, Jonathan David Bobaljik
- *Taking the Laboratory into the Field*, D.H. Whalen, Joyce McDonough
- *The Indo-European Homeland from Linguistic and Archaeological Perspectives*, David W. Anthony, Don Ringe
- *Vagueness and Imprecision: Empirical Foundations*, Stephanie Solt
- *Variation in Information Structure with Special Reference to Africa*, Tom Güldemann, Sabine Zerbian, Malte Zimmermann

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