

Prisonography: Sources of knowledge and perspectives about prisons

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By exploring the various sources and perspectives about prisons, one encounters a central problem in knowing about the prison: the problem of multiple realities. These multiple realities of the prison reflect the perspectives, values and experiences of those who gather and present the information. The public, the prisoner, the policy-maker, the correctional officer, the administrator and the politician, the lawyer and the judge all experience and shape the prison environment. In addition, the social scientist (sociologist, psychologist, anthropologist, political scientist all see through different disciplinary lenses), the investigative reporter, the legal scholar, the historian, the novelist and the film maker all interpret data and transmit impressions and images of prisons to the multifaceted audience which consumes the information they produce. Taken together, the matrix created by this information contains the reality of the prison. It is up to us to recognise this diversity of perspective and to select, analyse and interpret this information to improve our understanding.

Sources of knowledge about the prison

During the past 200 years, the sources of our knowledge about prisons have changed and expanded as our culture, its knowledge-producing and disseminating mechanisms, and the prison as an institution have changed. As prisons were developing in the early 19th century, there were no academic social scientists studying such issues as where to place prisons and the impact of prisons on communities where they were built. There were no professional associations like the American Correctional Association to provide recommended standards for the institutional developers to follow. There were no legal experts designing disciplinary procedures. As prisons developed, there were no social scientists monitoring the growth of prison subcultures or the psychological impact of confinement on prisoners and prison staff. What did exist were politicians, legal scholars, penal reformers and reform societies, novelists and the nascent news media.

In 1828, Greshom Powers – the agent and keeper of Auburn Prison – demonstrated the general lack of publicly available information about his prison, which was being touted as the model for the world to follow, when he observed that visitors to the prison regularly requested prison reports or pamphlets, from which they could learn. To his great regret the desired information could not be supplied. Much of it was only to be found scattered in the journals of the legislature, and much, in regard to police and discipline, existed only in practice, and was never reduced to writing.

What follows is a brief discussion of different types of materials from which information about prisons might be obtained and the relative value of utilising these sources.

The reformers and treatise writers

Prison writing for the first 150 years of the institution's existence was generally descriptive, often critical, and prescriptive. That is, it started from a particular set of values that guided a critical appraisal of the penal situation, as it existed at a particular time, and ended by proposing a series of reforms designed to remedy the problems identified.

Volunteer prison reform societies collected and disseminated much of the public knowledge about prisons in the early 1800s. Gathering information from personal visits, legislative documents, prison annual reports, surveys of prison administrators and local facilities the reform societies provided a picture of contemporary penal practice. In addition, they supported lobbying efforts in various state legislatures to improve the quality of prisons in what they believed was a more humane and effective direction.

The reports of the reform societies were supplemented by the work of treatise writers. From John Howard, *The State of Prisons in England and Wales* (1777), Dorothea Dix, *Remarks on Prisons and Prison Discipline in the United States* (1845), Frederick Wines, *Punishment and Reformation* (1895); Thomas Mott Osborne, *Society and Prisons* (1916); to Jessica Mitford, *Kind and Unusual Punishment* (1973); Norval Morris, *The Future of Imprisonment* (1974); David Fogel, *...We are the Living Proof ...* (1975); Gordon Hawkins, *The Prison: Policy and Practice* (1976); Robert Johnson, *Hard Times* (1987); and John Dulilio, *Governing Prisons* (1987) prison reform and the prison treatise have had a long tradition. The treatise writers often blended prison experience (as administrators or as members of reform societies) into their personal critique of and prescription for the prison. These documents are prescriptive and analytical, linking an analysis of the theoretical purposes of the prison with practice and policy. But they are more. They are aimed at the political and professional penal/correctional establishments and are attempts to influence correctional practice. The treatise serves to promote argument and discussion and gives evidence and visibility to the key issues of concern in the penal/correctional imagination and debates of particular times.

Government documents

Government documents concerning penal/correctional practice are as varied as the nature and complexity of the governmental structure of the country where they are produced. In each state there are legislative documents that provide authorisation and funding for penal institutions and their activities. There are records of legislative hearings that provide information about the background for legislative action. Reports of legislative, executive and special investigative committees and commissions explore specific components of correctional practice and make recommendations for reform. In addition, departments of correction at the state level and individual specific institutions often produce statistics, documents and annual reports concerning their activities.

At a more specific level, institutions and departments of corrections publish manuals of policy and procedure. These have become more complex to reflect legislative and judicial mandated changes in correctional practice and the standards developed by professional organisations. Little credence, however, can be given to these reports when not checked up by other contemporary comment.

The prison narrative

The autobiography or prison narrative has long been a staple source of information about the character of prison life. It is a direct and personal account of life inside of a prison. Prisoners themselves have most often written these accounts. However, prison administrators such as Thomas Mott Osborne, Lewis Lawes, Joseph Regan, and Thomas Murton have also provided glimpses into their philosophy and the practice of penal administration. In *The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (1978) Bruce Franklin lists over 400 literary works (autobiographies, plays, poetry and novels) that comprise a bibliography of the prison narrative from 1800-1977. From the *Confessions of Nat Turner* to Charles Colson's *Born Again*, from Lewis Paine's *Six Years in A Georgia Prison*, Elizabeth Flynn's *The Alderson Story* to the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, George Jackson's *Soledad Brother*, and Jack Abbott's *In the Belly of the Beast*, the prison narrative has long carried the prisoner's experiences and feelings across the walls that separate them from society.

Franklin describes two types of prison autobiographical narrative – the “confessional” and the “institutional”. In the first (historically, the oldest) the author describes the profligate nature of his or her life, admits the error of his ways and describes his reformation. The prison, its characteristics and personal reactions to it are not the focus of “confessional prison autobiographies”. However, the criminal and his reformation (often as a result of religious experience) provide support for the institution and practice of the prison.

While institutional prison narrative may describe reformation, it is a reformation achieved in spite of the nature of prison life. It is in the institutional prison biography that we began to see descriptions of the personal and psychological impact of imprisonment on prisoner. Struggles

with self-definition and the relationship of the individual and society began to take shape. Unlike the treatise, which presents critique and analysis, the goals of the prison autobiography are to expose the impact of the prison on the self, conveying the personal experience, the changes it brought about and the personal meaning (as opposed to the social meaning) of imprisonment.

Society and its representatives are called to account for their failure in meeting the standards they themselves set. The prisoner's voice thus becomes a voice for social critique, a voice for penal reform, in addition to being a voice struggling to make sense of the prisoner's own life. As critic the prisoner provides a perspective of those who experience the fate and circumstances the prison is designed to control. In the prison narrative, the prisoner describes that experience from a personal, not abstract, perspective.

The institutional prison narrative often reflects the assertion of personhood from within a structure that denies individuality. Feminist, Afro-American and other scholars of the "disenfranchised" have shown that the perspectives of these groups (women, Afro-Americans, slaves) have value and serve a corrective function related to the positions and perspectives of the "dominators", those who exercise power. In this regard, the prison narrative is akin to the slave narratives of the 1800s, the biographies of factory workers during the late 1800s and early 1900s, and those of women who portray a meaningful side of life normally ignored in the male-dominated culture. The prison narrative thus is a form of "resistance literature" (Kaplan 1992) exposing the colonisation of power, law, economy and culture and resisting its imposition.

The literature of correctional professionals

In 1870, the International Prison Congress that met in Cincinnati, Ohio published its declaration of principles that codified from the perspective of "correctional professionals". The foundation of this body in 1870 transferred the dominant place in the debates over penal policy from the essentially religious-oriented volunteer prison reform societies of the early 1800s to associations dominated by a professional penal establishment of prison administrators and experts who had a self-interest in prison issues and reform. From this point, professionals in the field would carry on the debates interested members of the public had carried on before.

Rather than debates over the "separate" and "congregate systems", professionals would deal with issues raised by the reformatory movement (how to integrate components into the existing prisons systems), acceptable forms of convict labor, state-centralised versus decentralised control, and the mechanical questions such as plumbing and heating and making prisons technically more efficient. There was now a professional management interest in corrections. Those in charge struggled with how to make their job of prison administration easier and more "effective". No longer was society to be saved and the perfect society modeled by the prison (Rothman, 1971) as it was thought in the early 1800s; now management details would be the concern (Bacon, 1917).

The application of scientific management principles meant that prison administration would focus on lines of command, communication mechanisms and control of correctional officers by wardens and supervisors and of inmates by correctional officers. There would need to be more detailed descriptions of the duties of the various posts and assignments so that there could be no mistake about what was expected. The emergence of the “professional” perspective in discussions of prison policy led to what Cohen (1985) calls “the hegemony of professional and expert opinion”. That is, those who administered the prisons would now shape our common sense understanding of the prison world, and the government and state whose power the prison reflects.

Legal perspectives

The prison is, above all, a legal institution. When the judge pronounces sentence in a courtroom, for many, it is in the prison where the human meaning of the criminal sentence takes form. Prison administrators do not choose their clients. Neither does the prison administrator decide when prisoners will be released. Indeed, the selection of those who occupy prisons is the result of a highly discretionary criminal justice process based on the definitions of what is and what is not criminal behavior and law enforcement and prosecutorial decisions concerning which law enforcement problems merit the most attention (eg, prohibition enforcement in the early 1900s and drug law enforcement in the 1980s). Executive pardons (widely used in the early 1800s) and parole and legislative actions determining the length of sentence (eg, sentencing guidelines), completion of one’s term, and good-time credits determine when the prisoner is released.

Besides determining the make-up of the prison population at any particular time, the law authorises various prison activities. Executive and legislative budgeting processes structure and provide (or do not provide) support for prison labour activities, educational programming and treatment services. Finally, the law determines the nature of the relationship between the person convicted of a crime and sentenced to prison and the state powers embodied in that incarceration.

Penal codes, codes of criminal procedure, and manuals of correctional legislation provide basic authorisations and limitations on state power in relation to the prisoner. Legal commentary found in law reviews and academic journals provide analysis of the issues and problems of the philosophical and operational difficulties of applying law to specific situations. In addition, decisions of various appeals courts provide valuable material. Not only are the specific holdings in specific cases and jurisdictions important, but also the fact situations which lead to the case provide insight into day-to-day correctional operations and practices. Appellate court decisions supply the reader precedent and interpretation of legislative statutes and penal practice. More importantly for understanding the prison, appellate decisions explore the variety of rationales used by correctional administrations (the state) to justify its activities.

Social science research

With the publication of Donald Clemmer's *The Prison Community* in 1940, the social and behavioral sciences began studying life inside a prison. From the introduction of prisons nearly 150 years earlier, writing about prison and prison life was dominated by prison reformers and administrative and policy concerns. Prison administrators who wrote of their experiences and prison inmates who confessed their crimes and described their individualistic experiences with prison life, and novelists and newspaper accounts provided the bulk of our knowledge about prison life. Until the publication of *The Prison Community*, the issues and topics covered in writings about prisons proceeded pretty much as it had since the Prison Discipline Society of Boston collected and published reports on prison issues and activities from around the country in 1826. There was more information about prisons in the popular culture than there was in the academic literature. In fact, one annotated bibliography of prison movies lists 109 films about prisons made between 1921 and 1940 (Querry, 1973).

In this seminal work, Clemmer moved knowledge about prisons from discussions of administrative and policy concerns to the study, description and analysis of the prison as a unique culture. Clemmer's work built on community studies such as Middletown (Lynd and Lynd 1925; Clemmer 1940, p xvi) and the Chicago school of the 1920s and 1930s. In these studies it was assumed that social behavior and social processes could be studied in the laboratory of specific, ecologies and communities (Bell and Newby 1972, pp 85-93; Clemmer 1940, p vi). In the social laboratory of the prison Clemmer explored communication patterns and language, social group formation, leadership, social structure, prison social control processes and sexual behavior. A key social process was "prisonisation", the process by which prisoners came to take on, more or less, the characteristics of the culture of which they were a part. Important to Clemmer, were the unique character of the various communities from which the prisoners came. For Clemmer, the prison experience would be shaped by previous experiences and the culture prisoners brought with them to the prison.

Our understanding of the relationship of custodial control over prisoners was addressed by Sykes (1956). Sykes extended Clemmer's contribution by bringing to the fore a more theoretical understanding of behavior in the prison world. Sykes skillfully blends an analysis of both those who wield formal power and their culture (the custodians) and those who targets of the custodial regime who experience the pains of imprisonment (the prisoners). Sykes' work challenged popular and theoretical assumption that prison custodians had absolute control over prisoners. In doing so, he documented and explained sociologically what correctional personnel and prisoners had in all probability long experienced.

Building on Sykes' work, Giallombardo (1966) demonstrated the importance of perception, expectations and gender in shaping the nature of the prison experience. While argot roles, group formation and relations between staff and women prisoners were described and analysed the women's prison society was different. While conflict, authority and control dominated expectations for the

men's prison, Giallombardo discussed women's social organisation in terms of "kinship groups" and the importance of social support such family-like associations provided. Indeed, the terms "power", "control", "conflict" and "violence" do not even appear in the index to Giallombardo's work. It was not until the late 1970s that such ideas as "helping-networks", (Johnson and Price 1981; Toch, 1977); and human service orientations (Lombardo 1981) emerged in relation to the study of men's prisons.

Sykes' description of the "pains of imprisonment" and "the defects of total power" set the stage for two new and related directions in the study of the prison: prisons as complex organisations and the prison experience as a form of psychological survival. In addition, the work of Goffman (1961) on the characteristics of the staff and inmate worlds guided attention to the meaning of both the *informal and formal* prison organisation. The importance of informal work groups and group norms had been long known to students of industrial organisations ever since the 1920s and 1930s when Elton Mayo conducted the Hawthorne studies. With Goffman's work, the ceremonial, meaning-creating rituals of prisons, mental hospitals and other segregated communities deepened our understanding of both community and organisational approaches. Goffman analysed the process of self-identity transformation and modes of adaptation undergone and used by the inmates and staff of total institutions.

Cohen and Taylor (1972) expanded the meaning of prison life approach to describe the psychological, perceptual and behavioral impact of the confinement experience. Rather than looking to other "total institutions" for conceptual links, Cohen and Taylor look to "extreme situations" such as the isolated life of explorers, people who migrate and suffer through natural and man-made disasters (pp 210-211). Changes in behaviors, lifestyles, perceptions of time, self-identity become crucial dependent variables related to institutionalisation. At this time, the socio-psychological experiments of Zimbardo (1971) Haney et al (1973) and Milgram (1969) began to explore the roots of the abusive dimensions of the authority to be found in transfer of responsibility, role taking and bureaucratic rule following.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a series of prison revolts in the US, culminating in the deaths of 43 prisoners and staff at Attica in 1971, highlighted the extent that prisoner and staff perceptions and rhetoric about the prison community had changed (Ussem and Kimball, 1989). There was a revolution taking place inside the walls as the stability of "The Big House" gave way to a redefinition of the prison as a political instrument of state power and a battle ground for racial and ethnic conflict (Irwin 1980). The "rehabilitative programming" and organisational emphasis of the 1950s and 1960s was supplemented in the late 1970s with political and legal analysis in the social science research focusing on the prison. Accountability concerning the exercise of power would now be required of those who administered the prisons. This led to studies of disciplinary procedures, parole decision-making, program assignment criteria, discrepancies between male and female institutions, medical and mental health services and provisions for prisoner safety and control, and prison crowding.

Institutional and social diversity

In the 1970s the impact of race on the social life of the prison and the experience of imprisonment was explored. In addition, the emergence of race in studies of prisons meant that questions of equality, fairness and the exercise of discretion needed to be addressed. Prison practices were now looked at not only in terms of their efficiency and effectiveness but also in terms of standards external to the prisons main functions. The racial integration of prison officer corps in the late 1970s and 1980s meant that a new dimension of general prison culture and organisation and the correctional officer culture and behaviour could also be explored (Jacobs, 1977; Carroll 1988). In the 1980s, the addition of women to traditionally all-male officer corps in male prisons meant that gender issues could be added to race as variables to be explored in the study of the prison society (Zimmer 1986; Jurik 1985).

In 1977, the publication of Hans Toch's *Living in Prison* added still another dimension to the study of the diversity to be found in the prison experience. Drawing on the study of environmental psychology, Toch left the "criminal" element of the prison and its population aside. Rather than studying the way criminals react to the prison environment, transactions between people and environments became the focus. Whether a prison is intended as custodial or as treatment (as emphasised in earlier organisational studies) has less impact for the individual than how he or she perceives that environment, how that environment fits his or her needs, and how people negotiate with their environment.

In addition, this transactional perspective derived from and led to an understanding that the prison was actually made up of multiplicity of environments, each having specific aggregations of resources with which individual prisoners constructed their responses to the prison environment. The cellblock, the dormitory, the mess hall, the prison school, prison Industries, the yard each had unique characteristics and resources. Death row (Johnson 1980, 1990), and solitary confinement (Jackson 1983) received specific attention. Each environment could provide comfort and each could provide danger depending on the needs and perceptions of the individuals involved. Individual prisoners differed in their needs (environmental concerns) and prison environments differed in their ability to match those needs.

The role of the correctional officer, has from the beginning been deemed central to successful prison administration and management. However, it has only been since the early 1970s that the place of the line-level correctional worker has been studied in some depth. From being described as strictly a custodian and supervisor of inmates, the correctional officer has been studied as a "change agent" (Hall et al 1968) and more recently, as a human service providers (Lombardo 1989; Johnson 1977; Philiber 1987). The impact of the correctional officer as an active and passive participant in shaping the character of the prison community (Crouch 1980; Lombardo 1989; Owen 1988; Jacobs 1977; Carroll 1978; Kauffman 1988) has been studied. In addition, the impact of the prison regime on the prison officer has allowed officer stress and coping strategies to be explored. Finally, the impact of

unionisation (Jacobs 1983) and racial and gender integration of correctional officer has also been studied and problems and impacts of these changes on the officers and the institutions in which they operate have received additional attention.

The prison in popular culture

Crime, the criminal and the criminal's punishment have long been a subject of popular fascination within the popular media – such as the newspaper, magazine and film. The print media provide a variety of types of information about policy issues and controversies at particular times, information about specific incidents such as riots and investigations into corruption. In addition, reporting patterns in the popular media provide insights into the relationship between prison and public opinion about the prison. Unlike professional, governmental, legal and social science perspectives that are normally aimed at elite audiences, the popular media translates prison ideas to the mass audience. Those who have studied available research on criminal justice and the popular media agree that studies of the relationship between the prison and the media are woefully lacking (Surette 1992, p 67; Lotz 1991, p 55; Lombardo 1988).

Prisons in the press

Though research on prison and popular culture is lacking, there is no lack of interest about prisons in popular culture. In-depth stories by investigative reporters concerning correctional issues abound. Such journalism supplements insights gained from other sources with detailed information and explanations from official and expert sources on the state of penal practices. Collectively, newspaper coverage of correctional issues in any particular geographic area provides some indication of the amount and type of information available to the general public about correctional matters. Jacobs' (1983) study of newspaper and television coverage of correctional issues during 1976 showed that there is more information in the public domain than one would expect.

There are a number of concepts that can guide one in thinking about and understanding the relationship of popular media presentations of the prison. One emphasises the "hegemony" producing effects of media images. Hegemony is what might be described as "that which goes without saying", or the "givens" or "the common sense realities of the world, which, it turns out, serve an ultimate purpose – that of maintaining the dominance of the ruling class" (Berger 1982, p 63). Here the images of the prison portrayed in popular media can be analysed in terms of the patterns of social relations they emphasise. The production of prison news might also be studied. The development of stories, sources used, editorial gate-keeping decisions to include or delete the writers material can be explored.

The prison in film

Feature films provide visual depictions and symbols of the diversity and confusing nature of reality in the prison. According to Rafter (2000), the nature of justice and attempts to struggle to achieve in are reflected in individual and institutional situations. Whether the lead characters are rightly or wrongly convicted, they are all portrayed observing and learning about prison reality (that is, undergoing degradation and prisonisation processes). They interact with guards and with other prisoners. In some films some prisoners demonstrate their humanity, while others are models of economic, sexual and psychological exploitation, demonstrating argot roles described in prison social science literature. Though guards are often portrayed as inflictor of pain (especially in films about Southern American prisons) they are also portrayed doing their jobs – opening, doors and gates, breaking up fights and often treating prisoners with respect when they deserve it and disrespect when they do not. From the experiences of the wrongly convicted prisoners of the 1930s to those of the criminal gangs members of the 1990s, prison films portray the uneasy relationship between the public and the modes of punishment inflicted on their behalf.

I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1932), *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) and *Brubaker* (1980) portray the brutality inflicted on the prisoners by the system in Southern road gangs and prisons. *In Each Dawn I Die* (1939), *The Glass House* (1972), *American Me* (1992) and *Shawshank Redemption* (1994), we see the solidarity of the “prisoners’ code” crumble under the pressure of prisoners exploiting other prisoners.

In these films prison officials are either accomplices in the exploitation either through direct participation or by omission. Prison gangs, guard brutality, systemic hypocrisy and the political forces and power that helps perpetuate the status quo become powerful messages. While films from the 1930s and 1940s portray prisoner conflict and status determined by the prisoner’s criminal background, more recent films portray racial and ethnic conflict which has come to characterise real prison life.

Conclusion

Over the past 200 years much has been written and said about prison. The multiple perspectives from which the prison world has been described make understanding prison a complex undertaking. However, understanding the nature of the perspectives and the need to recognise bias in all perspectives may help us discuss issues and prison practices with a bit more humility and hopefully more clarity. I recently conducted a workshop on “the prison” for a community housing a prison which was trying to come to grips with complex issues related to social justice, prisons as places of punishment and the heated political debate individuals with different perspectives brought to the discussion.

As part of the workshop, we discussed the problem of “multiple perspectives” and how people with different perspectives often “talked past each other” as if they were speaking different languages. After a couple of

hours searching for a common language, agreement on many issues was still elusive. However, much greater understanding replaced the heated political rhetoric. I hope that this chapter can contribute to our understanding of the prison, even if agreement on practical solutions still eludes us.