

Workshop 57

Paradoxes of Social Remoteness and Immediacy: The Prison as a Site of Anthropological Inquiry

Convenors:

Ueli Hostettler, University of Bern

uhostettler@ethno.unibe.ch

Manuela Ivone Pereira da Cunha, University of Minho, Braga

micunha@ics.uminho.pt

The proposed workshop seeks to foster a discussion of the central topics of the conference in relation to a particularly important but, in the case of social anthropology at least, fairly ignored social space in modern societies: the prison. Prisons, prison sciences, and modernity are mutual constituents of power/knowledge regimes of our time. Prisons, as total institutions, are also sites of complex social interactions, which in spite of their opaqueness to outside views, are closely connected to today's societal transformations such as the effects of increasing transnational flows of people, money, images, and commodities. The workshop aims mainly at tackling this paradox of social remoteness and immediacy both in theoretical and methodological terms. Given the marginality of prison studies in anthropology, we would like to refine goals and strategies for the workshop in a participative process and in accordance with potential participants' experiences and interests.

Expérience Carcérale et Constructions Identitaires

Léonore Le Caisne, L'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales

leonore.lecaisne@club-internet.fr

Dans cet espace de deux à trois hectares, fermé par des murs, où chacun observe chacun – surveillant/détenu, détenu/surveillant, détenu/détenu, surveillant/intervenant extérieur, intervenant extérieur/détenu, etc. -, l'ethnologue, observateur observé, a toutes les chances d'être happé par ses relations avec les uns et les autres. Qu'il accepte de se laisser affecter, et son expérience lui permettra de saisir, de sa place et bien entendu avec des dommages moindres que ses informateurs, les logiques contradictoires dans lesquelles se démènent les condamnés à de longues peines : la logique d'opposition au personnel avec leurs pairs, la logique de conformisation auprès du personnel, lui-même pris, selon son occupation du moment, dans des représentations contradictoires du condamné : un « autre » de nature ou un « autre » semblable. Pris dans cette double contrainte et dans les constructions identitaires qui en découlent, le détenu s'interroge alors sur ses choix de conduite et, plus généralement, sur sa « vérité ».

Reinforcing Hierarchies: The Spatial Ordering of Inmates

Minna Ruckenstein, University of Helsinki

minna.ruckenstein@helsinki.fi

Although typically represented as socially fixed and explicitly regulated communities, prisons are sites of intricate interactions, closely connected to the outside world. This paper presents material from an ongoing ethnographic research that examines the production of social relations in a closed male penitentiary in Helsinki. It particularly focuses on two interrelated topics: the distribution of prisoners in the penitentiary and the negotiation of power among the inmates. Both the personnel and the inmates seek to control the living arrangements of the penitentiary, because spatial practices preserve or even reinforce prison hierarchies. They are, for instance, closely linked to the trafficking of drugs inside the penitentiary, which is fundamental for the distribution of power among the inmates. The paper also describes the role of voluntary solitary confinement for the reproduction of power. For individual inmates segregation is a means to manage their vulnerability. Yet, the spatial isolation or transfer of prisoners to other prisons does not tackle the power structures of the inmate community. It rather means that the vulnerable prisoners who do not fit in, or who transgress the boundaries of the inmate culture are made invisible or to disappear. Overall, the spatial practices of the prison emphasize existing hierarchies between the prisoners: the stronger prisoners are rewarded while the more vulnerable inmates typically end up in closed or segregated units.

Conversion Processes: The Experience of Mexican Ex-Policemen in Prison

María Eugenia Suárez de Garay, University of Guadalajara
marulanda24@hotmail.com

This paper results from a research focusing on ex-policemen from different Mexican Law Enforcement Corporations, who were convicted for major crimes such as homicide, kidnapping, qualified robbery, authority abuse and excessive use of force. While focusing on the specificity of these prisoners' carceral experience, the main purpose of this paper is to examine the fragile balances and the tensions that involved their paths towards both sides of the law, in other words, their decisions to either enforce it or violate it. More specifically, I intend to address the aspects of the Mexican Law Enforcement culture which lured these police agents into transgressing the rules, norms, and laws they were supposed to enforce and abide by. I will focus on the discrimination, marginalization, unequal circumstances, and authoritarian structure which are experienced within the Law Enforcement institution and which converge to an extreme breakpoint that leads them to prison.

The Changing Nature of the Prison

Manuela Ivone Pereira da Cunha, University of Minho, Braga
micunha@ics.uminho.pt

A sudden reorganization of imprisoned populations recently took

place in Portugal, a reorganization which ultimately lies with the shape of retail drug economies and with changes in the styles of crime control induced by the war on drugs. The most striking feature of the qualitative shift that accompanied the carceral inflation of the nineties was the articulation of those imprisoned populations in networks of kinship and neighborhood, that is, in variable clusters of pre-prison relations. Using ethnographic data concerning a Portuguese women's penitentiary where that reconfiguration is especially salient, this paper will focus on the ways such clusters transformed the nature of the institution and changed the character of imprisonment, calling for a re-evaluation of the theoretical status of the prison and of the boundary that separates it from outside worlds.

Foreign Women in the Swiss Penal System: Ethnographic Perspectives

Ueli Hostettler, University of Bern

uhostettler@ethno.unibe.ch

Christin Achermann, University of Bern

christin.achermann@unine.ch

The paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork in the most important female-only prison facility in Switzerland. The prison population is characterized by a great heterogeneity with respect to offenses and personal backgrounds, such as nationality, socioeconomic status, and education. Foreign women represent well over 50 percent of the overall female prison population and from the 1980s onward, they originate mainly from Latin American countries. Most of these women were involved in illegal drug transportation and had not lived in Switzerland before. Upon the completion of their sentence they face deportation from Switzerland to their home countries. In this paper we explore the challenges that this situation creates for inmates as well as for the prison management and its staff.

Globalisation from Below and the Prison System

Hans-Rudolf Wicker, University of Bern

wicker@ethno.unibe.ch

During the 1990s social scientists have put a lot of weight on the so-called post-national condition. It was claimed that national belonging would be of less importance in the future and that transnational fields of action would gain in significance, supposing accordingly that nation states will lose in importance and that conflict patterns will be less framed by nationality but more by gender, race and ethnicity. I argue that the postnational claim in its generalised form is wrong and that quite the contrary is happening. Nationality matters, and a return to assimilation issues can be observed. This is specifically so in contexts resulting from what has been called "globalisation from below" such as transnational mobility, for example, which does not mirror or even contradict national interests. In my exposé

I will touch upon one of these spheres (namely penitentiary systems) where transnational mobility and national interests are at stake and where issues of post-national conditions are in no way apparent. I aim to show that the challenge of globalisation has a strong impact on prisons and on staff-inmate relations. In these institutions, topics such as gender, race and ethnicity are subordinated to issues of nationality.