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NEWSLETTER

A global history of the prison

Cultures of confinement

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guest editor

Michel Foucault has written of a 'great confinement' of the poor that peaked between 1650 and 1789, as punishment of the body was replaced by a regime of surveillance in the prison. Yet even a cursory look at modes of punishment beyond the 'Age of Enlightenment' shows that the 20th century, rather than the 18th, was marked by the incarceration of vast masses of people, to such an extent that Alain Besançon has characterised the period as 'the century of concentration camps'. Foucault's vision of herding paupers and vagrants into countless new hospitals and prisons not only confused intended policies with actual practices, thereby overstating the extent of incarceration in France before 1789 – the philosopher

seemed to miss the world around him. Over the course of the 20th century, confinement spread across the world to become the only recognised form of punishment alongside fines and the death sentence; countries differing widely in political ideology and social background replaced existing modes of punishment – from exile and servitude to the pillory and the gallows – with the custodial sentence. Prisons now span the globe, from communist China to democratic Britain, as ever-larger proportions of humanity find themselves locked behind bars, doing time for crime. Rates of incarceration have varied over the past century, but the trend is upwards, as new prisons continue to be built and prison populations swell in the Americas, Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

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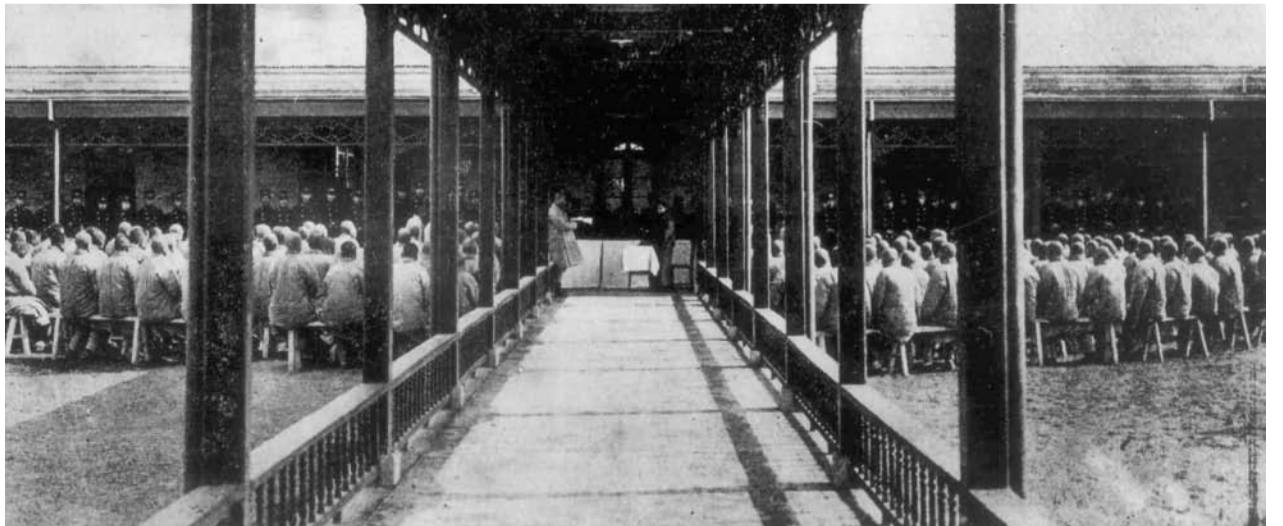
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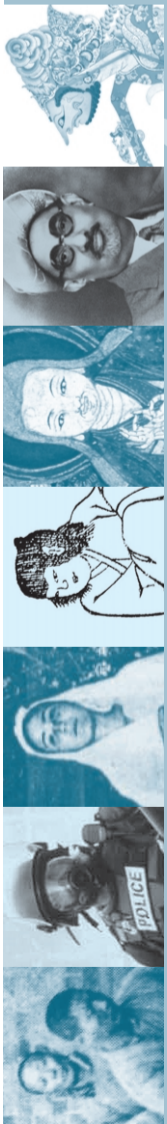
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Introduction



First conditional release from the model prison in Beijing

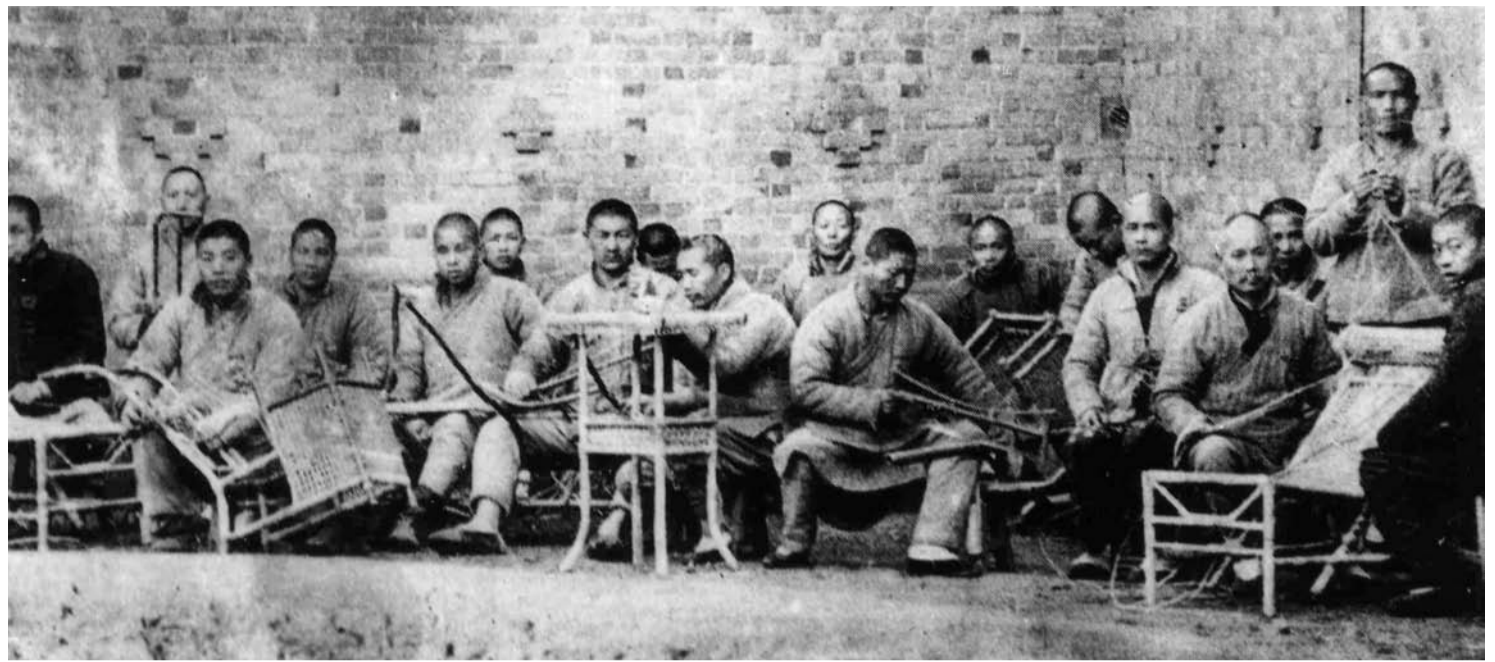


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While the prison has become ever more entrenched on a global scale, it also represents an incontrovertible failure, in theory and in practice. While their proposed missions have varied – from retribution and incapacitation to deterrence and rehabilitation – prisons from the very beginning resisted their supporters' intended purposes, generating wretched institutional conditions where humanitarian goals were heralded. The road to hell is paved with good intentions and the great expectations placed on prisons to perform often-contradictory goals (how is punishment compatible with reform?) stand in stark contrast to the climate of violence within its walls. A chasm separates proclaimed intentions from actual practices: monuments of order on paper turned into squalid places of human suffering confined by walls of bricks and mortar. Envisaged as a haven for repentance – 'a machine to grind rogues honest' according to Jeremy Bentham – prison is often no more than an enclave of violence, producing caged misery at worst, enforced lethargy at best. Contrary to the workhouse or the lunatic asylum, the prison is a failed invention of modernity that has yet to be dismantled. Prisons do not reform criminals, do not reduce re-offending rates, and do not address the social problems conducive to crime; if anything, incarceration produces violence and generates crime by meeting harm with harm. In the meantime, the prison has become all the more insidious as it has become firmly established, rarely challenged by political elites and ordinary people alike.

It is precisely the singular resilience of this failed institution that makes a history of the prison so urgent. It is not just another trendy topic of cultural history claiming a global dimension, nor one more unremarkable aspect of a staid history of state institutions, but an inquiry into the formation of an incarcerating society in which we all live. A first step towards a global history of the prison is to recognise that elites around the world were generally fascinated by the penitentiary ideal and eager to embrace it, rather than compelled by the dark forces of imperialism to adopt it. The prison epitomised the dreams of state officials and local authorities in Latin America, while confinement was praised as a viable alternative to banishment by the first Qing envoys to Europe who visited Pentonville Prison in the 1860s. In colonial contexts, prisons were part and parcel of the 'civilising mission' of colonisers as existing penal practices, often based on physical punishment, were viewed as 'barbaric' and 'uncivilised'. Yet post-colonial regimes more often than not consolidated rather than dismantled the prison for their own purposes.

The transfer of penal discourse and penitentiary institutions was not a one-way process. Diversity rather than uniformity characterised the use of the custodial sentence as prisons both changed and adapted to existing notions of crime and punishment. In the case of Burma, as Thet Thet Wintin and Ian Brown show (p. 5), the colonial imposition of a penitentiary scheme resonated with earlier forms of punishment, as various forms of confinement, in contrast to most parts of India, existed in



Work with bamboo and cane in Jiangxi Number One Prison

pre-colonial Burma. As ideas moved across borders, they were appropriated by modernising elites and transformed by distinct local political, economic, social and cultural conditions. Underneath an overarching rationale based on the idea of humane punishment, the prison was *multivalent*, capable of being adopted in a variety of mutually incompatible environments, from the *bagne* in Vietnam and the cellular prison in China to the concentration camps of South Africa. Confinement, in short, acquired specific cultural and social dimensions which help to explain its extraordinary resilience across the globe.

Foucault deserves credit for having transformed the history of the prison from an obscure field of institutional history into a thriving and exciting area of cultural studies. But too many

der is also important, even if the prison was generally for male captives. Tony Gorman (p. 7) captures the many ways in which women in the Middle East suffered greater social stigma from being viewed as criminal deviants. Created and controlled by men, the prison system was not isolated from the larger society outside, but permeated by its political and social relations. This is true too of work: most prisons emphasised industrial work as a chance for redemption and reformation, thus shaping the prison as a male-centred institution. Prison work on Japan's northern frontier is the topic of Pia Vogler's contribution (p. 8), where she focuses on the prison's permeability. In Hokkaido even the children of guards were instructed in classrooms behind prison walls until 1886.

Most historians have written about the prison in society, but as these articles point out, we need a history of society in prison. Moving away from the serene panopticon we find that the boundaries of most prisons were porous as guards colluded with prisoners, ideas and objects (drugs or books) moved in and out of confinement, and, more generally, religious, social, ethnic and gender hierarchies were replicated inside the prison, undermining the very notion of equality among prisoners to create social exclusion. Society colonised the prison and undermined discipline to a much greater extent than discipline ever managed to move out of the prison to order society. And where states did succeed – against all odds – to build more centralised and better policed prisons, it has generally been to maintain social inequalities and politically repressive regimes rather than to reform the alleged criminal. Hard questions raised by the global prison need to be faced, lest we unwittingly contribute to the legitimacy of an institution which most penal specialists, including prison directors themselves, wisely see as a failing sanction of last resort only. <

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of his followers have taken on board his vision of the prison as the perfect realisation of the modern state. Archival evidence – which allows us to move away from official rhetoric and lofty ideals towards the messy realities of incarceration – on the contrary, highlights the very limits of the state. As Carlos Aguirre has pointed out in a recent book on the prisoners of Lima, the constant lack of financial resources, poor strategies of personnel recruitment, lack of control over prison guards and corruption inside the penal system meant that the authorities who operated the prisons had great discretion in dealing with prisoners and often did not support the main goals of prison reform. Entirely absent from ambitious explanatory schemes about the panopticon are the prisoners themselves. Just as the continued use of violence by prison guards created penal realities that had little to do with grand designs on paper, prisoners were never the passive victims of a great 'disciplinary project'.

A comparative history of confinement that puts prison life back into the picture not only tells us much about the agency of ordinary people supposed to be captives, but also illustrates how and why prison fails to be redemptive. As David Arnold notes in his paper (p. 6), prisoners were seldom entirely compliant; in the long history of the colonial prison, there were many ways for prisoners to evade or resist the restrictions prison authorities sought to impose upon them. Émile Durkheim observed long ago that the core problem of the prison as a form of discipline resides in the lack of inclination among the majority of prisoners to participate in the process of 'reformation'. In other institutional situations such as the school or the factory, the individual must to some extent share the goals of the disciplinary process for discipline to be effective. By robbing prisoners of self-respect – so central to self-discipline – the prison did not produce 'disciplined subjects', but hardened recidivists.

If prisoner experiences are central to understanding the actual workings of the penitentiary project, the question of gen-

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All photographs from Frank Dikötter, *Crime, Punishment and Prison in Modern China* (2002, Columbia University Press). <http://homepage.mac.com/dikotter/>

Cultures of Confinement: The History of the Prison in Global Perspective, edited by Frank Dikötter and Ian Brown, will be published by Hurst. The volume, the end result of a research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, brings together specialists of the history of the prison in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America and highlights the complex cultural negotiations which took place in encounters between Europe and the rest of the world, pointing out the acts of resistance and appropriation which actively transformed the cultural meanings and social practices associated with confinement.



Foreign Section of the Ward Road Gaol in Shanghai